

DIALOGUE

a journal of mormon thought

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RECONSIDERING RECONCILIATION

Dear Editor,

I read with interest Robert A. Rees, “Truth and Reconciliation: Reflections on the Fortieth Anniversary of the LDS Church’s Lifting the Priesthood and Temple Restrictions for Black Mormons of African Descent” in the summer 2023 issue of *Dialogue* (56, no. 2).

My biography is much like Rees’s. I was born in the latter years of the “silent generation,” growing into young adulthood in a white environment while trying to come to grips with the civil rights turmoil. I too found the birth lineage explanation for the restrictions difficult to reconcile with the Mormon emphases on divine justice and individual sin/punishment. Likewise, the pre-mortal behavior justification ignored the equally core doctrines of repentance and forgiveness. Like Rees, I congratulated myself for shedding my “scales of racial prejudice” while remaining for a long time largely blind to my intransigent unconscious prejudice and the privileges of my whiteness, sex, and sexual orientation/identity.

Despite our similarities, I found myself disagreeing with Rees on several issues. I was disappointed with his unnecessary vitriolic characterizations of earlier LDS beliefs (“noxious fiction,” “inhumane beliefs,” “false teachings,” “evil perpetrated in the name of revelation and divine sanction,” among others). For another, Rees contends that there is “little question” that the priesthood restriction was instituted to maintain white racial purity by proscribing miscegenation (61). I must admit to finding this explanation wanting. How does this explain why a black man and his black wife should be restricted from temple worship? Might the priesthood restriction be better explained by the theory that Brigham Young’s concern, whether political or theological, was with a black man presiding over a white man in Church hierarchy?

Rees also distorts the affirmations of the Church’s “Race and the Priesthood” Gospel Topics essay. Consider the following: “Official acknowledgement that the practice [priesthood restriction] had been

wrong all along in the ‘Race and the Priesthood’ essay” (71). To my reading, the essay only states that the contemporary Church “disavows” as current official Church doctrine the “theories” that have been used to justify the restrictions practice.

Rees seems to be proposing that the (or one) primary mission of the Church should be leadership in progressive social issues and bemoans the fact that the Church squandered the opportunity to be “at the vanguard of various racial equality movements” (67). Rather, the Church focus on saving (exalting) souls in the afterlife requires the cultivation of a positive image and avoidance of unnecessary alienation of segments of the population, which, it seems to me, is best accomplished by steering a moderate direction that avoids both excessive cultural lags and being at the forefront of social revolutions.

How might the Church best deal with the problem of racism persistence despite repeated official condemnations of racism in all its forms? It seems to me that what is needed is continuing encouragement to (1) recognize our internal racist tendencies, (2) strive to limit their adverse effects on our emotional reactions and behavior, and (3) minimize the inheritance of similar tendencies by the rising genera-

tion by working to eliminate the visible and invisible cultural influences and pointing out objectional behaviors and the harms and injustice of racism. Contrary to Rees, I don’t see why this entails the rehashing of history, apologies, or the disparaging of Church leaders, past and present. Such approaches render one’s work less likely to be taken seriously in the Latter-day Saint community.

Since Church leaders tend to be (overly) conservative, I agree with Rees that an important role of our scholars is to encourage movement in a progressive direction. One approach might be to heighten our awareness and deepen our understanding of the definitions of racism. As philosopher and ethicist Judith Lichtenberg has observed: “In general, white people today use the word ‘racism’ to refer to the explicit conscious belief in racial superiority . . . black people mean . . . a set of practices and institutions that result in the oppression of black people . . . [so if a white person denies a consciousness of racism, this] is insufficient to prevent injustice and suffering that divides along racial lines.” (“Racism in the Head, Racism in the World” in *Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: The Big Questions*, edited by Naomi Zack, Laurie Shrage, and Crispin Sartwell [Oxford: Blackwell, 1998], 43–44). This challenges Mor-

mon scholars to explore the unrecognized biases among groups of white, heterosexual Mormons or even the institutional effects of a ruling hierarchy made up exclusively of white, male heterosexuals from the silent generation. As one

of our more distinguished Mormon scholars, I am confident that Rees has many meaningful insights to yet share with us, and I look forward to his future work.

Clyde D. Ford
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“THEY HAVE RECEIVED MANY WOUNDS”: APPLYING A TRAUMA-INFORMED LENS TO THE BOOK OF MORMON

Margaret Olsen Hemming and
HB Franchino-Olsen

Trauma decontextualized in a person looks like personality. Trauma decontextualized in a family looks like family traits. Trauma decontextualized in a people looks like culture.

—Resmaa Menakem¹

Introduction

The field of biblical studies has made significant inroads in understanding scripture through a trauma hermeneutic in recent years, with efficacious results.² Biblical interpreters using the lens of trauma have drawn on the fields of psychology, sociology, comparative literature, and refugee studies to understand scriptural text in new ways. A trauma

1. Nicholas Collura, “When Patients Talk Politics: Opportunities for Recontextualizing Ministerial Theory and Practice,” *Pastoral Psychology* 71 (2022): 556, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-022-01013-3>.

2. See, for example, Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette, *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016); David M. Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible’s Traumatic Origins* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2014); and Kathleen M. O’Connor, *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011). A review of the study of the Bible and trauma theory can be found in David G. Garber Jr.’s “Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 14, no. 1 (2015): 24–44.

hermeneutic (or trauma-informed lens or reading) not only recognizes the ways in which the experience of trauma immediately affects individuals but also how trauma ripples through generations and communities and how the text may reflect the effects of unprocessed trauma and play a role in healing from traumatic events. Rather than a single method of interpretation, the field of biblical trauma studies has created a “frame of reference” that draws on many different trauma theories and is intended to be coupled with other diverse forms of biblical criticism.³ It is “a fluid orientation, or sensitivity in reading with different possible emphases.”⁴ Yet this “heuristic framework”⁵ has been severely underutilized in readings of the Book of Mormon, a scriptural text that contains an abundance of stories of traumatic events. Two important exceptions to this are in the work of Deidre Green and Kylie Nielson Turley, both of whom have brilliantly used a trauma-informed hermeneutic to yield fascinating insights into the characters of Jacob and Alma.⁶ This article will explain what trauma is and how to be trauma informed, describe a few examples from the Book of Mormon in which a sensitivity to trauma could reveal greater insights from the text, and argue for the importance of using a trauma hermeneutic. We conclude with an application of a trauma hermeneutic in religious settings and an argument for the importance of being aware of how scriptural trauma may interact with the potential trauma of readers.

3. Garber, “Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies,” 25.

4. James W. S. Yansen Jr., *Daughter Zion’s Trauma: A Trauma-Informed Reading of the Book of Lamentations* (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2019), 13.

5. Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette, “Defining ‘Trauma’ as a Useful Lens for Biblical Interpretation,” in *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma*, 13.

6. Deidre Nicole Green, *Jacob: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2020); Kylie Nielson Turley, *Alma 1–29: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2020); and “Alma’s Hell: Repentance, Consequence, and the Lake of Fire and Brimstone,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 28, no. 1 (2019).

Defining Trauma

The word “trauma” has become a modern buzzword, often applied to contexts or situations without a clear understanding of the term. Literally “wound” in Greek, trauma can be physical, such as the physical trauma to our organs resulting from a bullet wound, or psychological, such as the mental and emotional trauma we carry with us after an upsetting or violent event. Trauma “results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.”⁷ Psychological trauma, the focus of this article, can be understood by examining (1) the event, (2) how it is experienced, and (3) its effects.⁸

Trauma can occur on a macro or micro scale. Macrotraumatic events (also called communal trauma) simultaneously impact a large group or a society, introducing long-term consequences with which members of the group must grapple with for many years. These include natural disasters, wars, mass shootings, pandemics, and other violent or destructive events with the power to upend many lives. They can also include institutional action or inaction, such as a church or university covering up abuse or failing to protect marginalized individuals.⁹

7. Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), *Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services*, Treatment Improvement Protocol Series 57 (Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [US], 2014), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207201/>.

8. NHS Scotland, “NES Trauma Informed—What Is Meant by Trauma?,” accessed Aug. 15, 2022, available at <https://transformingpsychologicaltrauma.scot/resources/understanding-trauma/>.

9. Daniel Gutierrez and Andrea Gutierrez, “Developing a Trauma-Informed Lens in the College Classroom And Empowering Students through Building Positive Relationships,” *Contemporary Issues in Education Research* 12, no. 1 (2019):13, <https://doi.org/10.19030/cier.v12i1.10258>.

Though the situations at the heart of such institutional trauma may directly impact only a small number of individuals (e.g., those abused by persons in power), the implications of an institution protecting abusers or failing to act when its members were harmed can trigger ripples of distress, harm, and distrust across the institution, leading to a macrotraumatic event. Microtraumatic events hold the same power to upend lives and destroy mental health as the macro events, though these typically impact a smaller number of people at once. Micro traumas can include familial events such as abuse, death, or divorce; experiences of or exposures to community violence such as assault, exploitation, or bullying; or any other interpersonal or individual event that causes injury, shame, or other physical or psychological harm for those involved.¹⁰

Trauma can also be passed intergenerationally in various pathways, including biochemically, culturally, and narratively. Biochemically, trauma can be inherited via epigenetic effects wherein markers at the chromosomal level are passed across the generations. Culturally, it may be taught via parenting practices or familial expectations. These pathways may be closely intertwined. For example, a Jewish mother who has survived the extermination camps of World War II may pass the trauma of that experience to her children in their inherited epigenetic markings and through her discipline and nurturing practices, both of which were shaped by the trauma she experienced.¹¹ These inherited traumas may then be passed to her grandchildren both epigenetically and by the parenting and mental health of her children in their parental role. Collective trauma can be transmitted intergenerationally, as a massive,

10. Gutierrez and Gutierrez, "Developing a Trauma-Informed Lens," 13–14.

11. Natan P. F. Kellermann "Epigenetic Transmission of Holocaust Trauma: Can Nightmares Be Inherited?" *Israel Journal of Psychiatry and Related Sciences* 50, no. 1 (2013) 33–39; Natan P. F. Kellermann, "Epigenetic Transgenerational Transmission of Holocaust Trauma: A Review," Oct. 12, 2015, https://peterfelix.tripod.com/home/epigeneticctt_2015.pdf.

macrotraumatic event can disrupt “the fabric of communal life, changing core social institutional and cultural values.”¹² These shifts impact not only those alive who experience the traumatic event but the society and culture into which future generations are born.

Narratively, trauma may become an integral part of a group’s shared history.¹³ Examples of this can be seen in calls to “never forget” from a community following a terrorist attack or from an ethnic group targeted in a genocide. Collective group-based traumas can have far-reaching effects on the well-being of group members. Collective trauma not only creates psychological wounds that can exist for generations but also shapes the stories used to understand these wounds and the manner in which members seek to build resilience and overcome these adversities. Whether named or ignored, trauma shapes the individual lives and collective communities or cultures that it touches.

A Trauma-Informed Hermeneutic

Knowing the definition of trauma is different from being trauma informed. To be trauma informed means to approach an individual, group, or context with a view and understanding of how they (or it) has been shaped by trauma and adjusting the approach or expectations of the person(s) based on this understanding.¹⁴ To use a trauma-informed lens means to shift perspective from a critical, accusatory one of “What is wrong with you?” to a more sensitive, person-centered one of “What

12. Laurence J. Kirmayer, Robert Lemelson, and Mark Barad, “Introduction: Inscribing Trauma in Culture, Brain, and Body,” in *Understanding Trauma: Integrating Biological, Clinical, and Cultural Perspectives*, edited by Laurence J. Kirmayer, Robert Lemelson, and Mark Barad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 10.

13. Kirmayer, Lemelson, and Barad, “Introduction: Inscribing Trauma”; Ami Harbin, “Resilience and Group-Based Harm,” *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics* 12, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.3138/ijfab.12.1.02>.

14. NHS Scotland, “NES Trauma Informed.”

has happened to you? What have you experienced?”¹⁵ Because trauma is a nearly universal experience, the trauma-informed approach is not siloed to only those providing psychological care to trauma survivors; instead, it is a lens that can allow us all to see the humanity and the history of the individuals, groups, and cultural traditions surrounding us. The trauma-informed lens can be flexible in its application and has space for considering how context, culture, and history impact how individuals process events and the impact these potential traumas have.

A trauma-informed lens allows us to interpret how someone’s trauma history may affect their behavior and beliefs and reminds us that our language and actions should be adjusted with others’ traumas in mind. This lens is a reminder that “trauma shapes our thinking” and the thinking of others “in ways that are both explicit and hidden.”¹⁶ To be trauma informed is to allow our understanding of trauma to influence how we interpret the world and what we put out into the world with a recognition of both the traumas of others and the personal traumas we carry.

Using a trauma-informed hermeneutic means considering how trauma affected and continues to affect writers and readers of the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon is a text unusually focused on human suffering: war, rape, famine, abuse, murder, slavery, natural disasters, and other forms of violence all occur within its pages. As Helaman states in the book of Alma, “They have received many wounds.”¹⁷

We propose that a trauma-informed hermeneutic is a valuable lens through which to consider the Book of Mormon, as it empowers readers with unique tools and perspectives on the text. A trauma-informed lens applied to scripture (1) inherently acknowledges that a

15. “Viewing Your Work through a Trauma-Informed Lens,” *Relias*, modified Dec. 27, 2018, accessed June 6, 2022, <https://www.relias.com/blog/viewing-your-work-through-a-trauma-informed-lens>.

16. Kirmayer, Lemelson, and Barad. “Introduction: Inscribing Trauma,” 4.

17. Alma 58:40.

reader does not have a complete understanding of the text unless the effects of trauma on individuals within the text and on the narrative as a whole are considered; (2) allows for alternate interpretations of the text, including symbolic representations of violent or traumatic events; (3) complements historical and literary approaches to scripture via an examination of the impact of trauma on individuals and communities and via the creation of survival literature; (4) can help a reader approach the text, its characters, and its writer(s) with increased empathy; and (5) facilitates the transformation of disturbing passages of scripture into healing ones.

Methodology

As Grant Hardy has noted, the Book of Mormon is “first and foremost a narrative, offered to us by specific, named narrators.”¹⁸ In this reading, we take those narrators at their word and engage with them as complex individuals with personal histories, private thoughts, and goals. Whether reading the Book of Mormon as literary fiction or as history, this approach offers readers a more serious examination of the text. Perhaps more importantly, this method helps readers and scholars of the Book of Mormon use the book—in whatever capacity—in ways more sensitive to survivors of trauma.

Potential Difficulties

One difficulty of using a trauma-informed lens is the possibly unanswerable question of whether ancient people experienced trauma in the ways as trauma theory posits today. It appears they certainly had different sensibilities regarding human life and the inevitability of suffering. Pastor James Yansen argues that some language of a trauma hermeneutic, such as a diagnosis of “post-traumatic stress disorder” would be anachronistic for a biblical interpretation. He writes, “Being

18. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), xv.

intentionally self-critical is crucial in applications of insights from trauma studies to biblical texts. It is important to avoid the distinctive danger of ethnocentrism in ‘imposing the Western trauma model’ on non-Western entities and texts.¹⁹ Certainly, scholars must proceed cautiously in negotiating the interface of modern understandings of trauma theory with ancient texts, particularly as the scientific study of trauma has largely occurred in Western cultures.

However, there is good evidence to argue that trauma and its effects can be observed in scripture. As explained above, the trauma response is a neurological condition that occurs because of a person’s inability to cope with their lived experiences. Broadly speaking, it is a physiological rather than a cultural condition, although cultural context shapes the ways in which trauma is experienced.²⁰ Trauma specialist Marten deVries has argued convincingly that while trauma and its biological effects are universal, methods of healing are heavily based on cultural values and social support.²¹ While trauma has only emerged as a recognized field of study within the last few decades, people have long observed, but been unable to articulate or explain, the markers of trauma. Trauma is not new, even if our language to analyze and understand it is.²²

Perhaps the best way of exploring whether people in scriptural text experienced trauma is simply to carefully read the text in search of signs of trauma-response behavior in individuals and communities. If individuals seem to experience lasting harm after disaster or if communities

19. Yansen, *Daughter Zion’s Trauma*, 9.

20. Yansen, *Daughter Zion’s Trauma*, 7.

21. Marten W. deVries, “Trauma in Cultural Perspective,” in *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*, edited by Bessel A. van der Kolk, Alexander C. McFarlane, and Lars Weisaeth (New York: Guilford Press, 1996), 398–413.

22. Shelley Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 3.

show the destructive and identity-forming effects of trauma, we may infer that a trauma hermeneutic is reasonable. As theologian Daniel Smith-Christopher argues, we must ask the question, “Were these events faced by the ancient exiles, or ancient warriors, actually traumatizing for the people involved? Were they really disastrous for *them*?”²³ This article argues that on an individual and communal scale, the observational answer for the Book of Mormon is in the affirmative.

Individual Trauma: Examples from the Life of Nephi

Individual, or micro, traumas can be found throughout the stories of the Book of Mormon, beginning with Nephi. Many instances of violence and trauma marked Nephi’s life, including threats to his life and the lives of family members, dislocation, food insecurity, physical abuse, and witnessing the abuse of family members. Reading the record of Nephi with a trauma-informed lens means sitting with the hurt and harm of each of these events and pondering how Nephi’s traumas—individually and cumulatively, as they compounded throughout his life course—impacted his health, his worldview, and his ministry across his life. It also involves considering how the individual traumas that Nephi experienced shaped his interactions with others, as a parent and a leader, expanding the impact of these traumas beyond Nephi as his words and behaviors were influenced by his traumatic experiences. His parenting was almost certainly affected by the family violence and traumas he survived, meaning the impact of his individual trauma was passed to subsequent generations via attachment, epigenetic, and behavioral pathways. While we call these more focused or familial events individual traumas, a trauma-informed reading requires that we

23. Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, “Reading War and Trauma: Suggestions Toward a Social-Psychological Exegesis of Exile and War in Biblical Texts,” in *Interpreting Exile: Displacement and Deportation in Biblical and Modern Contexts*, edited by Brad Kelle (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2011), 264.

acknowledge and consider how the trauma experienced by one person (or a few people) ripples outward to impact the lives of many more people, including moving forward in time to affect those not yet born.

Rather than giving a singular interpretation, a trauma hermeneutic illuminates difficult questions for the reader to ponder and themes to explore. We offer a few examples of such questions here and invite the reader to ponder these questions and consider what other questions could be drawn from a trauma-informed reading of Nephi's life and words.

Nephi is beaten with a rod and an angel intervenes (1 Nephi 3:28–30). Nephi and Sam are abused by their older brothers, Laman and Lemuel. The text indicates that verbal abuse (“many hard words” spoken) escalated to physical abuse, which was severe as the younger brothers were beaten with a rod. Only once the violence escalates to severe physical abuse does an angel appear and intervene, perhaps because Nephi and Sam would have otherwise been killed.

A trauma hermeneutic of this incident leaves the reader to consider how the abuse and the timing of the intervention represents a trauma for Nephi. We are left to ponder how this shaped his life and his understanding of God.

- *Does Nephi interpret this trauma to mean that God tolerates or allows some abuse, given the late timing of the intervention? Does this event shape his understanding of what violence God sees as acceptable? Does this impact what he teaches his children about God and violence?*
- *Does Nephi understand the issue here to be his brothers' wickedness, rather than their violence? Consequently, does this event shape his belief that as long as a person perpetrating/doing violence is not “wicked” or has faith in God that the violence is acceptable?*

Nephi kills Laban (1 Nephi 4:5–18). Nephi enters Jerusalem to obtain the plates of brass from Laban. He finds an unconscious Laban and feels compelled by the Spirit to kill him with his own sword. After some resistance, he kills Laban by decapitation.

This event immediately follows Nephi's own severe victimization inflicted by his older brothers. He then feels required by the Spirit to step into the role of perpetrator and enact more violence by killing Laban. We are left to ponder how these violent events impacted each other and Nephi.

- *How has Nephi's traumatic experience with his brothers and the angel impacted him as he perpetuates this violence and creates this trauma? How does the late intervention by the angel, along with the command to kill Laban, shape Nephi and his views about how God feels about violence, suffering, and harm for the rest of his life?*

Nephi is bound in the wilderness and threatened with death (1 Nephi 7:16–19). Laman and Lemuel bind Nephi with cords and leave him in the wilderness. When Nephi prays and is released from the bounds, he speaks to his brothers again, who are once again enraged and seek to hurt him. Only when the wife, daughters, and son of Ishmael step between Nephi and his angry brothers is the situation diffused.

Nephi watches as others step in the line of violence to save his life and stop the abuse. These women and this boy risk being abused or hurt themselves for Nephi's sake. Nephi is seeing that the abuse in his family that is targeted at him can hurt and threaten others, including those outside of his family. We are left to wonder how this shapes his view of families and his role in relation to the violence.

- *Do these episodes of violence and harm inflicted on him and others cause Nephi to parent his children in a way that ensures they are prepared to respond swiftly and efficiently to threats and violence? How do these traumatic events shape the narratives he passes to his family and children about the Lamanites, which fuel justification for generations of war?*

Nephi's bow breaks and his fatigued and hungry family complain about their suffering (1 Nephi 16:17–22). After many days of travel, Nephi and those in his company stop to rest and find food. Nephi breaks his bow and can no longer hunt. Many in the group—Laman, Lemuel, sons of Ishmael, Lehi, and (likely) their wives and children—complain of

their hunger and all that they have suffered in the wilderness since leaving Jerusalem. Nephi is affronted by their complaints and murmuring.

This passage lays out behavior by Nephi that may seem harsh or lacking in empathy. Nephi is impatient and frustrated by the complaints of those in the group when they are tired and hungry and have just lost their means of obtaining food. Readers who have experienced severe hunger or food insecurity may know well the consuming ache of gnawing hunger and exhaustion and the difficulties of not complaining in those circumstances. A trauma-informed reading may help us understand the actions of Nephi here, given the violence and trauma he has already experienced in life, and cause us to consider the ongoing impact of that trauma through Nephi's actions and worldview.

- *How have Nephi's traumas shaped his response to complaints about hunger and fatigue? Because he has survived worse, is he less patient with those who are suffering under less severe or less abusive conditions? What does this passage tell us about how his individual trauma may have influenced his parenting and governing of the coming generations? Do these experiences represent potential traumas for the younger generations around Nephi?*

Once Nephi and the others reach the promised land, the difficult and traumatic events in his life do not end. His life continues to be marked by violence and upheaval with much of his suffering at the hands of his older brothers. His role as a prophet did not exempt him from these abusive and violent experiences. However, these experiences do seem to have left their mark in the form of trauma that shaped his views and the words he recorded as a prophet. To uncritically accept these words of Nephi without a trauma-informed lens is to not only miss enormous context and nuance in the text—it also risks passing on the harm of some of his words, such as when he emphasizes the nonfair skin of the Lamanites and describes them as having “a skin of blackness,” “cursed,” and “loathsome.”²⁴ This understanding brought on by a

24. 2 Nephi 5:21–25.

trauma hermeneutic is the only way to stop the cycle of harm and interrupt the perpetuation of further harm in our readings and teachings. If we recognize and name the individual trauma woven through Nephi's life and words, we are able to ensure that Nephi's hurt and trauma does not cause further damage among us.²⁵

Communal Trauma: Examples from the Book of Alma

Trauma does not only function individually; it also has “a social dimension.”²⁶ Communal trauma occurs when an event such as a war, natural disaster, epidemic, or technological calamity affects an entire society and collective identity. It looks fundamentally different from individual trauma. Although it is made up of a collection of singular experiences, the harm generated by communal trauma is greater than the sum of its parts. “When traumatic violence reigns down upon a whole society, trauma becomes a public disaster. When suffering and loss heaped upon one person is no more than a miniscule moment in the massive destruction of a society and its habitat, violence magnifies its effects in uncountable ways.”²⁷ Communal trauma creates additional problems for traumatized people by creating or exacerbating disconnection and hindering healing. Three primary effects emerge from communal trauma, all of which may be observed in the Book of Mormon, particularly in the Book of Alma.

Broken-Spiritedness

The first effect is a term coined from refugee studies, called “broken-spiritedness.” If “spirit” is “a sense of connection to self, others, and

25. Fatimah Salleh and Margaret Olsen Hemming, *The Book of Mormon for the Least of These* (Salt Lake City, Utah: BCC Press), 1:66–68.

26. Kai Erikson, “Notes on Trauma and Community,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 185.

27. O'Connor, *Jeremiah*, 3.

nature; to the vision and hopes for the future; to God and sources of meaning in life; and to the sacred,”²⁸ then broken-spiritedness is when a major disaster disrupts or interferes with “sources of meaning and the sacred, challenging the power of religion.”²⁹ Without sources for meaning-making, a culture that previously shared spiritual narratives of purpose and identity may be caught “mid-mourning,” without the tools to process the trauma and heal from it.³⁰

Sociologist Kai Erikson describes an example of broken-spiritedness in the case of Grassy Narrows, which involved the dumping of 20,000 pounds of mercury into the Lake of the Woods region of Ontario by a paper and pulp company between 1962 to 1970. When the dumping came to light in early 1970, the Ojibwa First Nations people who lived and made a living fishing there were devastated. Their environment had been decimated, their major source of income disappeared, and many suffered debilitating health effects from the mercury. The Ojibwa people struggled with a wave of religious and cultural disaffection that the Ojibwa leaders were unable to hold back in the following years. The collective effect of individual traumatic experiences of the flood led to a weakening of the community as broken-spiritedness strained people’s sense of context or meaning in the world.³¹

One possible example of broken-spiritedness in the Book of Mormon is in Alma 45:21–24, when the Nephites were recovering from a particularly bloody war with the Lamanites and Zoramites. The text states that “*because of their wars with the Lamanites and the many*

28. John P. Wilson, “The Broken Spirit: Posttraumatic Damage to the Self,” in *Broken Spirits: The Treatment of Traumatized Asylum Seekers, Refugees, and War and Torture Victims*, by John P. Wilson and Boris Droždek (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2005), 112.

29. Philip Browning Helsel, “Shared Pleasure to Soothe the Broken Spirit: Collective Trauma and Qoheleth,” in *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma*, 85.

30. Helsel, “Shared Pleasure,” 85.

31. Kai T. Erikson, *A New Species of Trouble: Explorations in Disaster, Trauma, and Community* (New York: Norton, 1994), 27–57.

little dissensions and disturbances which had been among the people, it became expedient that the word of God should be declared among them, yea, and that a regulation should be made throughout the church” (Alma 45:21; emphasis added). The word “because” implies that the impact of violence is to necessitate Helaman and other church leaders to shore up the church. In the wake of the severe trauma of the “work of death” (Alma 44:20), the people began to disassociate from the church. Regardless of their efforts, “dissension” arose, and the people would no longer follow their traditional leaders. Although the text claims that this is because the people grew proud because of riches (Alma 45:24), a trauma hermeneutic would be sensitive to whether this community is suffering from broken-spiritedness following disaster. It might ask the following questions.

- *How do the Nephite soldiers who have recently participated in extremely bloody warfare and then “returned and came to their houses and their lands” (Alma 44:23) reintegrate into their communities? Did any of the violence they experienced in war affect their families?*
- *What were the “little dissensions and disturbances” (Alma 44:21), and were they related to the greater violence? Was this a part of a pattern of violence and a community that was in a crisis of faith?*

Helaman repeats the work of establishing a “regulation” in the church following the end of war in Alma 62:44, and again the text attributes the need for it to the violence and contention that has occurred. These two moments in Alma following long-standing bloodshed indicate that the people experienced some degree of broken-spiritedness in the periods following war.

Social Destruction

Similar, but not identical, to broken-spiritedness is when communal trauma prompts social disintegration and “damages the textures of community.”³² Traumatized communities are not merely a collection

32. Erikson, “Notes on Trauma and Community,” 187.

of traumatized individuals.³³ The social body, as an organism, sustains damage over time that is difficult to repair. The original trauma, rather than acting as a discrete event, prompts a decrease in trust, intimacy, shared traditions, and communality and an increase in fear, suspicion, and isolation, creating long-term repercussions and a lack of support for healing. As Erikson describes the damages to the social organism of the community: “‘I’ continue to exist, though damaged and maybe even permanently changed. ‘You’ continue to exist, though distant and hard to relate to. But ‘we’ no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body.”³⁴ The social fabric cannot withstand the compounded stress, and people disconnect and withdraw, creating conditions more likely to result in conflict and perhaps further trauma. Helsel describes this as a “vicious cycle of disconnection in which individual trauma and the erosion of communality [go] hand in hand.”³⁵

This “vicious cycle of disconnection” is precisely what we see throughout the Book of Alma, which is essentially a story about a society moving between states of negative peace, fragmentation, and outright war (with some exceptional periods of true peace). It begins in the very first chapter of Alma, in which Nehor kills Gideon³⁶ and incites a schism with the Nephite nation.³⁷ In the following chapters, the peoples of the Book of Mormon do not go more than six years without a major battle, with the text describing in striking detail the viciousness of violence and the subsequent mourning.³⁸

Although the book claims periods of “continual peace,”³⁹ in actuality these last only a few years at a time, making them more like ceasefires

33. Garber, “Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies,” 28.

34. Erikson, “Notes on Trauma and Community,” 233.

35. Helsel, “Shared Pleasure,” 87.

36. Alma 1:9.

37. Alma 1:16.

38. For example, Alma 3:26, 16:9, 30:2, 4:2, 28:4, and 28:5–6.

39. Alma 4:5.

than a true peace. These stretches of time in between overt violence are where readers can observe patterns of social disconnection. This is most clearly seen in the ruptures within the Nephite church. These take several different forms, but they all share a pattern of social hierarchies that disturb human relationships, decrease cohesion, and increase isolation.

In one example of social disconnection during a period of “peace,” the text describes Alma’s success efforts to “establish the church more fully,”⁴⁰ although this claim is compromised by the immediate fracturing into socioeconomic hierarchies. The text says they became “scornful, one towards another, and they began to persecute those that did not believe according to their own will and pleasure.”⁴¹ Even within the church, “there were envyings, and strife, and malice, and persecutions, and pride.”⁴² Thus, a social institution meant to function as a unifying and foundational part of Nephite culture is not only failing, but actually acting to alienate and harm people. Clearly, the social fabric is extremely frail.

Reading this period without the context of the wars that immediately preceded and followed it fails to reveal the possible reasons why the social fabric was so weak. It makes it easy to read the text as binary or simplistic, with some people as casually evil. Erikson’s theory of communal trauma puts those people in the context of the violence and disruption they have very recently experienced. Only a few years previously, “tens of thousands” of people died in battle in Nephite land.⁴³ The composite body sustained a wound that would not heal easily or quickly. Erikson’s description of collective trauma as “a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality”⁴⁴ can be observed in

40. Alma 4:4.

41. Alma 4:8.

42. Alma 4:9.

43. Alma 3:26.

44. Erikson, *A New Species of Trouble*, 233.

this society so forcefully dividing itself into antagonistic groups shortly after disaster. The violence and trauma that occurs *within* the Nephite society, then, is potentially an effect of the recent violence and trauma that has occurred *between* the Nephites and the Lamanites. As Erikson describes, trauma leads to the social disintegration that then prompts further violence. Questions that arise for readers might include the following.

- *How did this social destruction seen in Alma impact the future generations? How could this failing social fabric and lack of a unified “we” shape the relationship people and families had to each other, the church, and God, and what evidence of this may exist in the text?*
- *The loss of community and connection can breed distrust and less grace in one’s interactions with others. How did this traumatic social disintegration impact the stories the people told about their families and people (e.g., within the Nephite church)? How did it impact the stories and perspectives people believed about their “enemies”?*

Scholar Philip Browning Helsel argues that a critical contribution of a trauma hermeneutic to biblical studies is to understand the ways in which violence, collective trauma, and social destruction is cyclical and chronic and how that appears in sacred text.⁴⁵ Reading the Book of Mormon through this lens, as a text about the “disruption to the relational fabric of community,”⁴⁶ may lend important new insights into how violence has long-term consequences for individuals and societies and how this affects their spiritual health.

Social Construction

Paradoxically, trauma also sometimes functions as a socially constructive force, establishing or strengthening groups that have a shared traumatic experience. Trauma scholar Jeffrey Alexander describes this phenomenon occurring when a collective body accepts a particular

45. Helsel, “Shared Pleasure,” 100.

46. Helsel, “Shared Pleasure,” 100.

trauma narrative and uses it to form a social identity. The narrative does four things: (1) it describes a certain group that has suffered in similar ways and for the same reason; (2) it recounts the hardship endured; (3) it names the agent responsible for the wound; and (4) it petitions those outside of the group for sympathy.⁴⁷ The formation of a post-traumatic social construction group identity is not an automatic outcome of collective trauma. “It occurs through a process of representation that brings about a new collective identity.”⁴⁸ On the composite level, trauma becomes a powerful social force, integrated into the “communal memory through acts of representation and meaning-making.”⁴⁹ This process may play a critical role when a group faces the forces of social destruction described above. When a community faces the stress of collective trauma, creating meaning from an event and renegotiating an identity formed under the experience of that trauma may counteract the forces of social disintegration.⁵⁰

What is most salient in the formation of the identity is the trauma *narrative* not the *factual events* of what occurred. Whether or not the community members acted as aggressors or victims, whether or not the community actually underwent certain tragedies, and/or whether or not the named agent was in fact responsible is less important than the story the community tells itself in establishing or reinforcing identity. As biblical scholar David Janzen writes, “From this point of view, trauma is a social construction of meaning.”⁵¹ Alexander describes this

47. Boase and Frechette, “Defining ‘Trauma,’” 8.

48. Elizabeth Boase, “Fragmented Voices: Collective Identity and Traumatization in Lamentations,” in *Bible Through the Lense of Trauma*, 54.

49. Boase, “Fragmented Voices,” 55.

50. David Janzen, “Claimed and Unclaimed Experience: Problematic Readings of Trauma in the Hebrew Bible,” *Biblical Interpretation* 27 (2019): 171.

51. Janzen, “Claimed and Unclaimed Experience,” 170.

story as the “master narrative”: a story or set of stories that hold the identity of a community in place.⁵²

Identity formed through collective trauma can be passed down through generations. Citing sociologist Vamik Volkan, Janzen describes how even “shared feelings of powerlessness . . . can help bind a community together, and groups can choose to reawaken these and other feelings associated with the trauma—can deliberately claim this experience, in other words—even generations after the event, in order to portray a current enemy as responsible for past trauma.”⁵³ In other words, trauma is being passed down not only epigenetically but also narratively and sometimes even voluntarily, as part of a social force to form a cohesive group with an antagonistic relationship toward the agent responsible for the trauma.

The repeating theme of shifting identities, dissenting groups, and new names makes this idea of social construction through trauma interesting to consider throughout the Book of Mormon. One fascinating example of social construction following trauma is that of the Zoramites.

The Zoramites first function as an important part of the Book of Mormon plot in Alma 30, although the text makes a passing reference to them earlier.⁵⁴ It is unclear whether the Zoramites in Alma 30 are a stable ethnic group descended from that previous reference or whether these Zoramites are a newly formed dissenting group from the Nephites. It is also unclear whether they are biological descendants of the Zoram who came with Nephi out of Jerusalem or whether they name themselves after their current leader, also named Zoram.⁵⁵ However, what is pertinent is that they *identify* with the story of Zoram, whether or

52. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 17.

53. Janzen, “Claimed and Unclaimed Experience,” 170.

54. Such as Jacob 1:13.

55. Alma 31:1.

not they *factually* are biologically related to him. This becomes clear later in the conflict between the Zoramites and the Nephites, when the Zoramites' leader, Ammoron, attacks Moroni with the words "I am Ammoron, and a descendant of Zoram, whom your fathers pressed and brought out of Jerusalem. And behold now, I am a bold Lamanite."⁵⁶

These two sentences have a fascinating ethnic and narrative background. Because the record only offers Nephi's version of events, readers do not know how willingly Zoram went into the wilderness with Lehi's family. However, even Nephi admits that he used force in the situation.⁵⁷ Zoram's choice between dislocation and death was hardly a choice.⁵⁸ The Zoramites, who appear to have lived on the margins of a stratified Nephite society,⁵⁹ apparently have a narrative in which their ancestor experienced severe trauma at the hands of Nephi. This version of their origin story, exacerbated by their current state of powerlessness in the Nephite/Mulekite society, appears to have strengthened the influence of ethnic identity. In Alma 31, the Zoramites have become Nephite dissenters and removed themselves to the city of Antionum. They construct a new society, including a new government, church, and social order. Others have observed that the Zoramites seem intent on building a nation that is intentionally oppositional to the Nephites, rather than toward ideals of their own.⁶⁰ When Alma and his companions disrupt that new (immensely hierarchical) society and attempt to reform it with Nephite teachings, the elite Zoramites are further radicalized toward their Zoramite identity. The remainder of their story within the Book of Mormon is one of extreme violence, as they become

56. Alma 54:23.

57. 1 Nephi 4:31.

58. Salleh and Olsen Hemming, *The Book of Mormon for the Least of These*, 1:90.

59. Sherri Mills Benson, "The Zoramite Separation: A Sociological Perspective," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005): 78–79.

60. Benson, "The Zoramite Separation," 84.

virulently anti-Nephite and lead the Lamanite military in attacking the Nephites.⁶¹ Ammoron's strange declaration that he is "a bold Lamanite" is the final realignment in shifting group identities.

Were the Zoramites simply bad people? A trauma-informed reading reveals a more complex story of this group, in which people inherited a narrative of a traumatic event, claimed the experience, identified an agent responsible for their suffering, and strengthened an identity that might otherwise have become dormant. The violence they perceived as enacted on them—directly through Nephi's treatment of Zoram and structurally through the hierarchies of Nephite society—generated a trauma response. This does not excuse the violence they commit, but it does better explain it.

A Trauma-Informed Hermeneutic for Survival Literature

Survival literature is "literature produced in the aftermath of a major catastrophe and its accompanying atrocities by survivors of that catastrophe."⁶² The devastation may occur on an individual or collective level. Rev. David Garber draws the analogy of if trauma is the injury, then survival literature is the scar: "the visible trace offered by the survivor that points in the direction of the initial experience."⁶³

One of the most important functions of survival literature is its role in the meaning-making process. One of the primary characteristics of trauma is that it resists integration into the broader narrative of a survivor's life. It becomes a memory fragment, a shard that continues to cause disruption and disconnection until it can be articulated and

61. Alma 43:44.

62. Tod Linafelt, *Surviving Lamentations: Catastrophe, Lament, and Protest in the Afterlife of a Biblical Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 18.

63. Garber, "Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies," 28.

processed.⁶⁴ Turning a traumatic experience into narrative form and interpreting it to have cause and purpose is not merely a creation of record; it is also a crucial part of re-creating order, agency, and meaning, thus facilitating recovery.⁶⁵ In scripture, this narrative has an added layer: it interprets the events in relationship to God. Thus, the meaning-making is interwoven with the speaker's faith in a divine being who has allowed or even caused disastrous events to happen. In a trauma hermeneutic, then, one purpose of scripture is to "name the suffering experienced by the community and to bring that lived reality before the presence of God."⁶⁶ This work has the potential capacity to help survivors replace harmful memories and thoughts with a narrative that restores a sense of well-being.

In this, however, there lies an important paradox. Survival literary theory "maintains as a cornerstone the unknowability of trauma."⁶⁷ Even while survivors attempt to use words to articulate what happened to them, they will never be fully able to convey the experience. Trauma specialist Cathy Caruth describes this as "speechless terror" or "the incomprehensibility of pain."⁶⁸ Turley effectively notes how the narrative of Alma the Younger's experience in Ammonihah, in which he witnessed the brutal deaths of women and children by fire, points to Alma's trauma in the experience. The chief judge of Ammonihah

64. Brad E. Kelle, "Dealing with the Trauma of Defeat: The Rhetoric of the Devastation and Rejuvenation of Nature in Ezekiel," *Journal of Bible Literature* 128, no. 3 (2009): 483.

65. Margaret S. Odell, "Fragments of Traumatic Memory: *Šalmê zākār* and Child Sacrifice in Ezekiel 16:15–22," in *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma*, 112; O'Connor, *Jeremiah*, 5; Yansen, *Daughter Zion*, 14; Boase and Frechette, "Defining 'Trauma,'" 11.

66. Garber, "Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies," 31.

67. Boase and Frechette, "Defining 'Trauma,'" 11.

68. Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 172.

questions Alma and Amulek and physically abuses them while demanding a response, yet they remain silent. “Silence can be a rational choice, but it can also be a response to shocking trauma. . . . What a person’s eyes saw or ears heard or body felt is recorded in the brain, but . . . [the memories] are scattered and recorded in fragments.”⁶⁹ While the text may strive to bear witness and “to respond so that horror and violence do not have the last word,” terrible suffering is often beyond human language.⁷⁰

This limitation of language helps explain some of the signs of survival literature: it is often told in fragments, with a heavy use of imagery, symbols, wordplay, and “multiple levels of meaning.”⁷¹ It uses the world of analogy, poetry, and repetition because of the struggle to convey disaster in a straightforward manner. Survival literature does not merely “report facts but, in [a] different way, encounter—and make us encounter—strangeness.”⁷² Because the right words do not exist, the text is not straightforwardly referential. Importantly, this does not make survival literature unreliable or useless for historians. Instead, according to Caruth, those who wish to understand “must permit ‘*history*’ to arise where *immediate understanding* may not.”⁷³ This may change the framework for those reading scripture: rather than interpreting it as a historical account, a trauma hermeneutic sees holy text as an

69. Turley, *Alma* 1–29, 89.

70. Ruth Poser, “No Words: The Book of Ezekiel as Trauma Literature and a Response to Exile,” in *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma*, 39.

71. Garber, “Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies,” 26.

72. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (Milton Park, England: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 7.

73. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 11.

interpretive account. It is “art more than history, or better, art intervening in history.”⁷⁴

Where might readers see signals of survival literature in the Book of Mormon? Clearly, the Book of Mormon does not contain any passages comparable to Lamentations, Jeremiah, or Ezekiel, with their poems and verses about exile and genocide. The Book of Mormon seems to be intended more as a record than as a lament. Yet some verses seem to qualify as survival literature in their use of imagery and metaphor to describe the suffering and struggle the author has experienced:

O then, if I have seen so great things, if the Lord in his condescension unto the children of men hath visited men in so much mercy, why should my heart weep and my soul linger in the valley of sorrow, and my flesh waste away, and my strength slacken, because of mine afflictions? (2 Nephi 4:26)

I conclude this record, declaring that I have written according to the best of my knowledge, by saying that the time passed away with us, and also our lives passed away like as it were unto us a dream, we being a lonesome and a solemn people, wanderers, cast out from Jerusalem, born in tribulation, in a wilderness and hated of our brethren, which caused wars and contentions; wherefore, we did mourn out our days. (Jacob 7:26)⁷⁵

And it came to pass that there was thick darkness upon all the face of the land, insomuch that the inhabitants thereof who had not fallen could feel the vapor of darkness. And there could be no light, because of the darkness, neither candles, neither torches; neither could there be fire kindled with their fine and exceedingly dry wood, so that there could not be any light at all. (3 Nephi 8:20–21)

74. O'Connor, *Jeremiah*, 5.

75. Deidre Nicole Green characterizes Jacob's description of the state of his people in this passage as “mass disassociation, or a dreamlike trance that distances people from a reality that would otherwise be too overwhelming to cope with, which is indicative of traumatic stress lived out on a grand scale.” Green, *Jacob*, 113.

These are three of many examples that a trauma hermeneutic would be sensitive toward, understanding that the imagery used might be intended to convey a feeling or experience rather than a factual event. A trauma-informed lens centers how the author uses text to process their own trauma and narrates God into that experience. It seeks to connect with the concerns of the survivor and look for multiple meanings of the text.

Trauma Hermeneutic and Theodicy

A trauma hermeneutic notices the ways in which people use scriptural text to make sense of the world and God's role within it. It is common within the Bible and the Book of Mormon for the text to blame death, famine, loss in battle, plague, and natural disasters as a curse from God. As readers, we are left to ponder: is God in fact the vengeful perpetrator of destructive wrath? As Alexander notes, "When causality is assigned in the religious arena, it raises issues of theodicy."⁷⁶ When trauma happens, any survivor must confront the question of why it occurred and who is responsible. In the case of a person or community of faith, that question has the added complexity of God's culpability. Survivors might wonder: *Did God let it happen? Was God unable to stop it? Was God too weak or did God simply not care? If I cannot count on God for protection, then when might it happen again?* Frequently, scriptural text seems to evade these questions through claiming the will of God and the sinful actions of the victim or victims as responsible for the disaster. By blaming God for destruction, the narrator paradoxically reclaims agency and power. For example, the book of Ezekiel insists that the Babylonians' triumph over Israel was due to Israel's sinfulness and Yahweh's desire for punishment⁷⁷ rather than the Babylonian's superior military strength or faithfulness. Theologian Brad Kelle argues that this simultaneously rejects the Babylonians' claim to power over Israel and

76. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory*, 19.

77. For example, Ezekiel 6:1–4; 12:17–20; 15:8; 33:28–29; 38:21–23.

rhetorically identifies Israel as God's people in need of repentance rather than as a conquered society.⁷⁸ This way of making sense of trauma is not unusual for trauma survivors. Those who endure horrific events sometimes blame themselves in order to restore some sense of order out of a chaotic universe. It can feel easier to be guilty than to be helpless.⁷⁹ As scholars Elizabeth Boase and Christopher Frechette argue, "An overwhelmingly threatening event often prompts interpretations of the cause of the experience in a way that places irrational blame on the self. Doing so serves as a survival mechanism; by providing an explanation and asserting a sense of control, blaming the self helps a person to confront the imminent threat of overwhelming chaos."⁸⁰

In this way, scriptural survival literature constructs a worldview that gives hope and order to a society, although it comes with costs, including blaming victims for the disasters and violence they have suffered.⁸¹ While restoring mental balance and reducing feelings of chaos, this may increase emotional anguish and possibly hinder the healing process as people struggle with shame and guilt for bringing their difficulties upon themselves. It also can create a crisis of theodicy. Boase points out that this crisis may take two forms: the belief that God is responsible for the trauma and God's apparent silence as it occurs.⁸² Thus, "Yahweh is both an oppressive presence . . . but is also silently absent."⁸³ Survival literature may help a community in crisis but create other harm in the process. A trauma hermeneutic is aware of how the narratives derived in a post-traumatic setting have complex effects.

78. Kelle, "Dealing with the Trauma of Defeat," 489.

79. Poser, "No Words," 36.

80. Boase and Frechette, "Defining 'Trauma,'" 5–6.

81. Janzen, "Claimed and Unclaimed Experience," 169.

82. Elizabeth Boase, "Constructing Meaning in the Face of Suffering: Theodicy in Lamentations," *Vetus Testamentum* 58 (2008): 456.

83. Garber, "Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies," 31.

The Book of Mormon offers many possible examples of authors and characters attempting to make sense of the horrific by blaming victims' sinfulness and/or God's will. Two cases include:

- The text blaming Limhi's people for their own suffering in Mosiah 21. The multiple military defeats they endure and their situation of effective slavery under the Lamanites is attributed to God's will⁸⁴ rather than the superior strength or numbers of the Lamanites. The text also claims that these traumatic events happened in order to pressure the people into repentance but that after they "did humble themselves even in the depth of humility" that "the Lord was slow to hear their cry because of their iniquities."⁸⁵
- When the Nephite dissenters and Lamanites successfully attack the land of Zarahemla, the text explains the Nephites' defeat as directly caused by the moral failings of the Nephites: "Now this great loss of the Nephites, and the great slaughter which was among them, would not have happened had it not been for their wickedness and their abomination which was among them; yea, and it was among those also who professed to belong to the church of God. . . . And because of this their great wickedness, and their boastings in their own strength, they were left in their own strength; therefore they did not prosper, but were afflicted and smitten, and driven before the Lamanites. . . . And it came to pass that they did repent and inasmuch as they did repent they did begin to prosper."⁸⁶

Scriptural claims that God not only sanctioned slavery and death in order to force repentance but then did not listen to prayers asking for help because of past transgressions are theologically burdensome for readers who have themselves suffered extreme violence or whose ancestors did. Those who inherited the effects of trauma due to a family history of slavery might question whether God truly approves of such methods in order to compel obedience. Yet a trauma-informed reading

84. Mosiah 21:4.

85. Mosiah 21:14–15.

86. Helaman 5:4:11–15.

understands that even those who live through the original trauma and create survival literature might attempt to find order in chaos by choosing a narrative in which God has chosen suffering for them. Doing so allows a powerless victim to “take the initiative and act effectively”⁸⁷—they can contain their misfortunes through making moral choices.

A trauma-informed hermeneutic comprehends the complexity of trauma literature and the ways in which it subtly appears within text. Indirect language, metaphor, and poetry might hint at pain hidden just below the stated idea or narrative. Theological explanations for suffering should be taken as the author’s attempt to make sense of the senseless rather than an authoritative description of divine will. As Boase and Frechette write, “To grasp the ways in which language can represent trauma opens up new avenues for understanding violent imagery, especially violent depictions of God, and shed light on organizing principles.”⁸⁸ To read the Book of Mormon in this way is an opportunity to understand how people who survived extreme trauma constructed theology.

Application of a Trauma-Informed Lens

A trauma-informed reading of the Book of Mormon requires an additional step beyond our interpretation of the text. In fact, the trauma-informed lens explicitly pushes us to not only consider and acknowledge the trauma contained in the text of the scripture and the voices (or missing voices) therein but to also examine how our own trauma shapes our reading. Additionally, as there is a long-standing tradition in the in the Church of Jesus of Christ of Latter-day Saints to teach the stories and sermons of the Book of Mormon over the pulpit and in church classroom groups, it is also crucial to be sensitive to and acknowledge the trauma of those sitting in these rooms and how these

87. Poser, “No Words,” 36.

88. Boase and Frechette, “Defining ‘Trauma,’” 16.

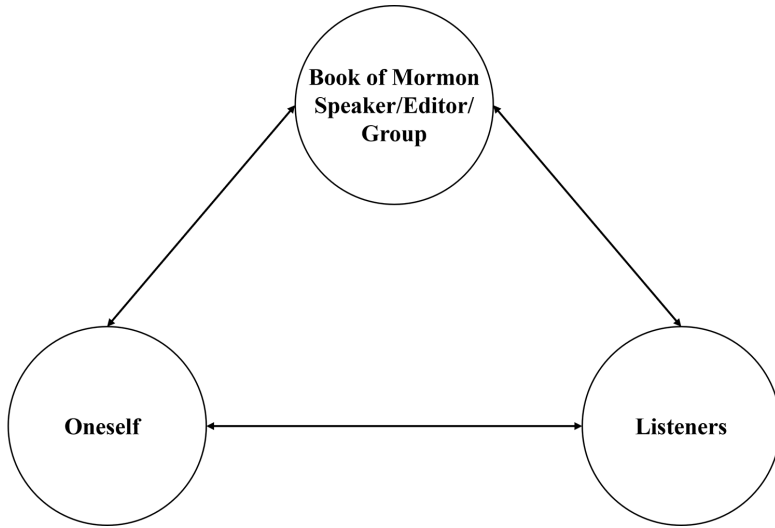


Figure 1. Three loci to consider when approaching the Book of Mormon with a trauma-informed lens.

interpretations in our sermons and lessons impact them. As such, to approach the Book of Mormon with a trauma-informed lens in the twenty-first century, we are required to consider at least three loci of trauma: the speaker (or editor or group) in the Book of Mormon, our own, and those who hear us discuss the text (figure 1).

To examine the trauma present—whether acknowledged or not—in the text of the Book of Mormon without consideration of trauma we, as the reader of the text, may carry severely limits and distorts the trauma hermeneutic applied. For example, imagine yourself as a reader of the Book of Mormon who has experienced severe family violence perpetrated by a sibling encountering Nephi’s words of his brothers beating him with a rod (1 Nephi 3).⁸⁹ If that reader seeks to consider

89. Certainly, some of you will not need to imagine such a circumstance, as you have found yourself in that position and experienced this form of family violence in your life. We are heartbroken and sorry this happened to you and are glad you are still here today.

how trauma has shaped the perspective and words of Nephi without considering their own response to this shared traumatic event, they will likely be unable to move deeply and meaningfully through a trauma-informed reading, as they are not recognizing how their own trauma is shaping the questions they are asking of or assumptions they are making in the text. They may struggle to relate to the response Nephi has to this event if it differs from their own response to the violence in their lives. Alternatively, they may feel anger that an angel was sent to intervene to stop this beating in Nephi's life but that they did not receive this form of divine intervention. Any of these responses are valid and arise from their own trauma impacting how they engage with the trauma in the text. By acknowledging, rather than repressing, the violence and trauma in their past, the reader may be able to step closer to the text, allowing them to engage in a trauma-informed reading that is more vulnerable and that brings more empathy for Nephi and the traumas in his story while also giving themselves space for their own traumatic history. This allows the reader to explicitly acknowledge that, though their trauma responses may differ from Nephi's or their path with God may diverge from his, there is beauty and value in considering his words through the lens of trauma while giving grace for how their own perspective has been shaped by trauma.

Finally, given the tradition to discuss the stories of the Book of Mormon over the pulpit and in church classes, it is crucial that any exploration of the words or lives in the Book of Mormon respects the unseen and unspoken traumas of those in the congregation or class. A teacher or speaker seeking to apply a trauma hermeneutic to the stories of Alma preaching in Ammonihah (Alma 14) or to the abduction of Lamanite daughters by the priests of Noah (Mosiah 12) must carefully consider the traumas that those listening to their lesson, sermon, or comment may have. There may be listeners who have experienced the loss of a parent or loved one by murder or fire (Alma 14:8) or experienced sexual assault (Mosiah 12:5), which will

shape the way they respond to these tragic and traumatic stories. To apply a trauma-informed lens thus requires that all discussion—by the teacher and by others in the room—of these events from the Book of Mormon is sensitive to the trauma that others in the room may carry. Rambo explains this idea as making space for trauma and its effect on faith stating, “Marking this space is not simply a way of advocating for persons who are unaccounted for. Instead, attempting to map the experiences of trauma comes from my conviction that our lives are inextricably bound together. Given what we know about the historical dimensions of trauma, no one remains untouched by overwhelming violence. Trauma becomes not simply a detour on the map of faith but, rather a significant reworking of the entire map.”⁹⁰ To make this space when exploring these stories in Alma 14 or Mosiah 12, a teacher or class member may want to approach the text to consider the traumatic implications for Alma of watching the murder by fire of women and children in Ammonihah; before they speak, they must thoughtfully reflect on what their words imply to those listening who may carry trauma. Do their insights into the text honor and respect those hurts? Or do they downplay the harm inherent in the events?⁹¹ Application of a trauma-informed lens that is sensitive to the trauma in the room can provide religious discussions that empower listeners rather than further traumatize them. Likewise, approaching the trauma in the text while holding space for our own trauma allows us to find more humanity and connection in the traumatic and human stories contained there. Rather than causing further harm to ourselves and others via a harsh or critical reading of the text that ignores the trauma in the stories and the

90. Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 9.

91. For instance, do they dismiss or minimize the loss of innocent lives in Alma 14:8 because of the promise of heaven for those victims and instead focus on the trauma Alma experienced by viewing such an event? Or are they careful to ensure that those listening will know that such a tragic loss of life and instance of community violence is painful and worthy of being mourned?

traumas of today, a trauma-informed hermeneutic can create a nurturing space that allows for readings of the Book of Mormon that can face and, potentially, heal the trauma we carry in ourselves or that listeners carry.

Conclusion

The benefits of using a trauma hermeneutic are clear. Scripture has long served as a narration of individuals' and communities' understanding of their relationship to God. In the wake of disaster, a trauma hermeneutic perceives that the readers' understanding of this narration is incomplete without an appreciation for the ways in which "trauma erodes aspects of identity and solidarity necessary for well-being."⁹² Stories of intense suffering, especially those attributed to divine punishment, have consistently raised questions of theodicy. Sections of scripture depicting God as destructive, abusive, and wrathful frequently seem inconsistent with those describing God as loving and merciful. A trauma-informed reading of scripture understands the human will to make order out of disorder and reassert control over chaos.⁹³ By attributing suffering to sin and divine will, a small amount of order is reinstated in the aftermath of catastrophe.

Second, a trauma hermeneutic allows for alternative interpretations of the text, including the recognition of "symbolic representations corresponding to actual violence"⁹⁴ and the importance of "fragmented and impressionistic images" that defy a "plain-sense account of events."⁹⁵

92. Boase and Frechette, "Defining 'Trauma,'" 15.

93. Boase, "Fragmented Voices," 61–62.

94. Boase and Frechette, "Defining 'Trauma,'" 16–17; though it is worth noting that "actual" violence is not a prerequisite for trauma or applying a trauma hermeneutic, nor is it reasonable to require the text to accurately represent a potentially violent event to make this hermeneutic applicable.

95. Boase and Frechette, "Defining 'Trauma,'" 13–14.

Strange imagery and language may indirectly point readers toward experiences of terror and loss.⁹⁶

Third, a trauma hermeneutic complements both historical and literary approaches to scripture. The field of comparative literature has helped shape the field of trauma biblical studies through the analysis of the “survival literature” produced during the atrocities of the twentieth century.⁹⁷ The investigation of narrative, symbolism, poetry, and testimony can all be deepened through an understanding of trauma. Additionally, historical scholars can benefit from a better awareness of the realities of the short- and long-term effects of traumatic violence on individuals and communities. This builds upon, rather than contradicts, historical-critical models of reading.⁹⁸

Fourth, those who have survived trauma often struggle to communicate their experiences to others effectively. Without understanding trauma, readers may shy away from certain passages or characters because they seem distasteful, frustrating, or incomprehensible. One of the most important goals of trauma studies is “to ask how we can listen to trauma beyond its pathology for the truth that it tells us.”⁹⁹ Whether readers enjoy sections of scripture about suffering and the people involved in them may be moot. Instead, looking through the lens of trauma could help readers *understand* even if they do not like or enjoy scripture. A trauma-informed biblical hermeneutic supports an interrogation of scriptural characters and writers in which readers transform the question “What’s wrong with you?” into “What happened to you?”¹⁰⁰ This shift in thinking crosses cultural boundaries and helps

96. Kelle, “Dealing with the Trauma of Defeat,” 482.

97. Garber, “Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies,” 26.

98. Boase and Frechette, “Defining ‘Trauma,’” 13.

99. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, viii.

100. Caralie Focht, “The Joseph Story: A Trauma-Informed Biblical Hermeneutic for Pastoral Care Providers,” *Pastoral Psychology* 69 (2020): 210.

increase empathy and compassion for subjects that may otherwise seem foreign.

Finally, the use of a trauma hermeneutic may make scripture relevant for readers today and help transform disturbing books of scripture into healing ones. Given current world events, many students of holy texts are searching for answers to questions about theodicy, human suffering, and how people narrate God into their lives during periods of darkness. It also gives a particular set of tools for reading scripture for those who have experienced trauma. One Old Testament professor has described how using a trauma-informed lens has transformed the dynamic in her seminary classes: “As the class unfolded and the student’s stories came out, I recognized something else about Jeremiah that before had been only an unarticulated hunch. The book did more than give voice to the afflicted. It was and is a most effective instrument of survival and healing.”¹⁰¹ This is, effectively, expanding the role of scripture, giving it an additional and critical function in pastoral care.

To the degree in which the Book of Mormon functions as survival literature, its coherence does not depend on a single narrative thread of trauma or a single identifiable point in which the record attempts to make sense of the trauma experienced. Throughout the book, people within the Book of Mormon endure a wide variety of individual and collective traumatic events. As is typical, their responses vary, with some people/groups reacting with further violence while others construct a theology that explains and reorganizes the disruption. Violence, suffering, trauma, and trauma responses run throughout this book of scripture.

While the field of biblical studies has already begun a serious study of how to use a trauma hermeneutic, the use of this method is rarely used for the Book of Mormon. The increasing understanding that trauma is, to varying degrees, a universal part of the human condition

101. O’Connor, *Jeremiah*, 5

makes this a compelling field of greater study. This article is clearly not an exhaustive review of all the trauma found in the text but rather an invitation to all readers to use this lens. Further work in this area should be cross-disciplinary, including the work in biblical studies, refugee studies, psychology, literary studies, and sociology. Most particularly, it should focus on the perspectives of those who have suffered most deeply from trauma and who stand on the margins of society. Their voices are critical in this work.

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MATERIALIZING FAITH AND POLITICS: THE UNSEEN POWER OF THE NCCS POCKET CONSTITUTION IN AMERICAN RELIGION

Nicholas B. Shrum

In 2014, Latter-day Saint painter Jon McNaughton painted a triumphal and patriotic, yet reverent, scene of Cliven Bundy on horseback, with one hand lifting an American flag and his hat covering his heart in the other. Peeking out from Bundy's shirt pocket is a pamphlet with the likeness of George Washington with a penetrating glare contrasting Cliven's prayer-closed eyes.¹ During the 2014 and 2016 Bundy stand-offs, antigovernment militia and protestors ensured that they came armed with guns, ammunition, and pocket Constitutions. The version carried by the Bundys, published by the National Center for Constitutional Studies (NCCS), the former Freemen Institute (FI), is the same that Senator Mike Lee brandished during his speech at the US Senate hearings for President Trump's 2020 Supreme Court nominee Amy Coney Barrett. Holding the pamphlet during the nationally televised session, Lee declared that "[the Constitution] is a thing that works, and works best when every one of us reads it, understands it."² What

1. Jon McNaughton, "Pray for America," *Jon McNaughton Fine Art*, accessed Nov. 10, 2021, <https://jonmcnaughton.com/pray-for-america-11x14-litho-print/>.

2. Chris D'Angelo and Christopher Mathias, "We Need to Talk About Sen. Mike Lee's Far-Right Pocket Constitution," *Huffington Post*, Oct. 16, 2020, accessed May 31, 2021, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/mike-lee-pocket-constitution_n_5f88b08cc5b681f7dal1fdee3.

are we to make of the prominence of this pocket Constitution in these scenes?

With more than fifteen million copies in circulation in the early twenty-first century, the pocket Constitution published by the NCCS has made headlines as politicians, antigovernment activists, and political commentators brandished it during protests and in the Senate Chamber of the US Capitol.³ While the text of the Constitution in the booklet is proofed word for word against the original Constitution of the United States, the surrounding material is curated to imbue the Constitution with religious significance and a particular political ideology. Thus, this document is a valuable source to consider in the context of Christian nationalism in the United States. Further, it shows how a Latter-day Saint belief in a divinely inspired Constitution subtly made its way into wider American reception in the latter twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

This article argues that the NCCS pocket Constitution becomes a commanding piece of material religion, an object that does not only reflect a political philosophy or a theological belief but acts on its own and transforms through performance. In the latter part of the article, I suggest the idea of “the corporeality of the Constitution,” or simply that the materiality, the “stuff,” or the physical presence of a pocket Constitution allows the document to anthropomorphize, to act, and to perform independent of the person holding it. Scholars of material religion have suggested that things are essential aspects of religion,

3. Naomi LaChance, “Ultra-Right Annotated Edition of Pocket Constitution Tops Amazon Charts after Khizr Khan’s DNC Speech,” *Intercept*, Aug. 1, 2016, accessed Apr. 17, 2021, <https://theintercept.com/2016/08/01/ultra-right-annotated-edition-of-pocket-constitution-tops-amazon-charts-after-khizr-khans-dnc-speech/>.

not simply additions or physical representations of it.⁴ Indeed, while the pocket Constitution is more clearly understood by the sources that inspired it, as an object, it is not only an extension of a particular worldview but has the capacity to operate independent of it. Due to its power as material religion, the pocket Constitution ceases to exist as bound pages of printed text.

The NCCS Pocket Constitution

Beginning in the late 1980s, the NCCS began publishing a pocket version of the US Constitution. As early as 1987, and in connection with the bicentennial of the Constitution, NCCS pocket Constitutions were made available for purchase at the price of twenty-five cents.⁵ Even in his official Church position as an apostle during the 1970s and 1980s, Ezra Taft Benson publicly supported the aims of the NCCS predecessor, the FI, to educate Americans about the “Judeo-Christian” roots of the United States and the divine quality of the Constitution as well as to distribute literature on these principles, including pocket Constitutions.⁶ Appropriately, the non-Constitutional text included in the introductory material speaks to the NCCS mission of framing the US Constitution with an emphasis on individual liberty (free agency), limited government, and the religious origins of the charter.

4. Birgit Meyer and others have explained that “a materialized study of religion begins with the assumption that things, their use, their valuation, and their appeal are not something added to a religion, but rather inextricable from it.” Birgit Meyer et al., “The Origin and Mission of Material Religion,” *Religion* 40 (2010): 210. Elsewhere, Meyer and Dick Houtman have argued that “religion cannot persist, let alone thrive, without the material things that serve to make it present—visible and tangible—in the world.” Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer, “Preface,” in *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*, edited by Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), xv.

5. “The Constitution,” *Southern Utah News* (Kanab, Utah), June 4, 1987, 2.

6. “Freemen Institute Begins Second Year,” *Utah Independent*, July 14, 1972, 1.

In 1971, W. Cleon Skousen founded the FI in Provo, Utah. Skousen, who served as an FBI agent, a police chief in Salt Lake City, and a Brigham Young University professor, became one of the most recognized Latter-day Saint authors in the postwar period. The original name of the organization referred to the Book of Mormon's "freemen," a group of ancient Americans dedicated to "maintain[ing] their rights and the privileges of their religion by a free government," as opposed to the "king men" who "were desirous that the law should be altered in a manner to overthrow the free government and to establish a king over the land."⁷ Established just past the midpoint of the Cold War, the FI's purpose was "to give light to the world" and help people "be aware of the problems in the world today."⁸ In a 1975 speech in Ogden, Utah, Skousen claimed that Church President David O. McKay had asked him in 1967 to establish the FI in part to fulfill Joseph Smith's purported prophecy that Latter-day Saint elders would save the Constitution that would "hang by a thread."⁹

Skousen and Ezra Taft Benson were both outspoken critics of New Deal liberalism in the form of the expanding welfare state and, most importantly, the spread of communism. Fearing the manifestation of these problems in the United States, Skousen and Benson were just two of a growing set of conservative Americans determined to protect what they understood to be a nation established upon Judeo-Christian principles from the attacks of godless communism and deliberate slights to their understanding of Latter-day Saint "free agency."¹⁰ Throughout the 1970s, Skousen and the FI conducted dozens of lectures on the Constitution

7. Alma 51:5–6.

8. Dave Phillips, "'Freemen Institute' Presents Political Views, Literature," *Daily Herald*, Nov. 29, 1971, 3.

9. Jim Boardman, "Loved or Hated, Cleon Skousen Wields Big Political Stick," *Salt Lake Tribune*, June 15, 1980, 2B.

10. Matthew L. Harris, *Watchman on the Tower: Ezra Taft Benson and the Making of the Mormon Right* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020), 19.

and its divine roots to thousands of Americans across the country and to more than fourteen countries around the world.¹¹ Skousen and the FI's reputation as an influence in Utah politics quickly gained momentum as their patronship helped elect Orrin Hatch to the US Senate in 1976.¹²

In November 1984, the FI changed its name to the NCCS and moved its official headquarters from Salt Lake City to Washington, D.C.¹³ This change was likely part of an effort to align more closely with the emerging religious right during the Regan administration.¹⁴ Even though Latter-day Saint leaders and a large proportion of members were aligned with evangelicals on the religious right on issues such as abortion, communism, and the Equal Rights Amendment, many evangelicals grew more and more concerned about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Southern Baptists, in particular, were worried about the LDS Church's growth in the American South.¹⁵ However, despite concerns within the Moral Majority and the emerging religious right during the late 1970s and early 1980s, Latter-day Saints found success in Washington, D.C., as the Reagan administration filled its ranks with a number of Latter-day Saint professionals.¹⁶ Skousen and the NCCS garnered admiration from Reagan thanks to Skousen's "fine public service" in his efforts and the efforts of the NCCS to instruct Americans on the importance of the Constitution.¹⁷ During these years,

11. Boardman, "Loved or Hated," 1B.

12. 109 Cong., Rec. S114 (2006) (remarks of Sen. Hatch).

13. J. J. Jackson, "Clever to Speak in Provo on Friday," *Daily Herald* (Provo, Utah), Nov. 29, 1984, 22, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/469370306/?terms=freemen%20institute%20name%20change&match=1>.

14. M. B. Brinkerhoff, J. C. Jacob, and M. M. Mackie, "Mormonism and the Moral Majority Make Strange Bedfellows? An Exploratory Critique," *Review of Religious Research* 28 (March 1987): 245.

15. Young, *We Gather Together*, 190.

16. Young, *We Gather Together*, 192.

17. Randal Powell, "The Day Soon Cometh?: Mormons, the Apocalypse, and the Shaping of a Nation," PhD diss. (Washington State University, 2010), 257.

Skousen found success in allying himself and the NCCS with leaders and forums associated with the religious right and was granted access to leadership positions within their institutions.¹⁸ Skousen also worked with Jerry Falwell, who praised Skousen as “the conservative answer to the Brookings Institute.”¹⁹ Additionally, the *Salt Lake Tribune* reported that members of the Moral Majority were enrolled in Skousen and the FI’s “Miracle of America” seminars in the early 1980s, evidence of how a distinctly Mormon nationalist worldview made its way into larger religious conservative audiences.²⁰

Skousen’s nephew, Joel Skousen, confirmed in a 1985 *Sunstone* magazine article that trepidation by evangelicals to affiliate and work with the FI due to its Latter-day Saint affiliation was indeed a reason for the name change. The article quoted Joel Skousen that “having a Salt Lake address” undoubtedly led to “Mormon identification,” which at the time was less than desirable due to “real backlash” in the fundamental and evangelical communities. Skousen attributed this backlash in part to the recent anti-Mormon Ed Decker film, *The God Makers*, which skewed realities of Latter-day Saint practices and doctrine but was widely distributed and shown to large audiences of evangelicals across the United States.²¹ Beyond the organization’s motivations in making its public appearance more appealing to wider American Christian

18. Powell, “The Day Soon Cometh,” 257. Skousen was on an advisory board with the Christian Voice and joined the Council for National Policy, which both “united top New Right Christians, politicians, and donors to craft GOP agendas and policies.”

19. Peter Gillians, “Freeman Institute Preaches Constitutionalism,” *Daily Spectrum* (St. George, Utah), Jun. 13, 1982, 18.

20. Larry Eichel, “Cleon Skousen: Humble Teacher or Apostle of the Right,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, Aug. 2, 1981, 26.

21. John Sillito, “Freeman Institute Changes Name,” *Sunstone*, Nov. 1985, 52–53. For more on *The God Makers*, see J. B. Haws, *The Mormon Image in the American Mind: Fifty Years of Public Perception* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 112–125, and Young, *We Gather Together*, 192–201.

audiences, Skousen had distinct beliefs about the role of religion in the United States.

The FI/NCCS claimed to teach Americans “Constitutional principles in the tradition of America’s Founding Fathers.”²² In its periodical bulletin and monthly publication the *Freemen Digest*, the FI/NCCS regularly published articles on what they believed the “founders” envisioned for the United States. Central to “the Founding Fathers’ Constitutional formula” was “The Secret to America’s Strength,” religion, and, implied in that, Christianity. Skousen further wrote that “the Founders felt the role of religion would be as important in our own day as it was in theirs” and that “religion is the foundation of morality.”²³ From the beginning, religious nationalism guided the FI/NCCS.

For example, the July 1978 issue of the *Freemen Digest* featured a series of articles on the establishment of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. The texts of those documents and an analysis of each by James Mussatti are framed by a crisis, described by editor Michael Chadwick as a “retreating away from the economic principles and political precepts which had been established by the Founders” as early as the 1930s.²⁴ Presumably, Chadwick was referring to the Roosevelt administration in the 1930s and the expansion of the New Deal during the Great Depression. Writing within the context of a conservative reaction to President Jimmy Carter’s administration in the late 1970s, the FI warned that “if in the near future we are going to step forth and restore the Constitution, we must become fully conversant

22. “Final talks on Heritage Set Oct. 12” *The Daily Herald*, Sep. 21, 1979, 2.

23. W. Cleon Skousen, *The Secret to America’s Strength: The Role of Religion in the Founding Fathers’ Constitutional Formula* (Salt Lake City: Freeman Institute, 1981), 1, 2, E. Jay Bell papers, 1833–2003, Box 23, Folder 1. Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, The University of Utah.

24. Michael Lloyd Chadwick, “The Task Facing America Today,” *Freemen Digest*, July 1978, 1, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

and wholeheartedly converted to the high principles contained in the inspired Constitution and the free institutions which it originally prescribed.”²⁵ Instead of reproducing the founding documents and letting them speak for themselves, the FI included the Mussatti analysis that frames them as “The Inspired Declaration of Independence” and “The Inspired Constitution” followed by the original texts.²⁶ Appropriately, the issue’s back cover contains a single quote by George Washington from his first inaugural address: “No People can be bound to acknowledge and adore the visible hand, which conducts the Affairs of men more than the People of the United States. Every step, by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation, seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency.”²⁷ This practice of framing the text of the founding document with religious language acts as a forerunner for what the NCCS later did with the pocket Constitution. The role of religion remains an important pillar of the NCCS today as it continues to sacralize the US Constitution as a product of divine intervention.

The cover of the NCCS Constitution booklet (figure 1) features a portrait of George Washington by Austrian-American painter Robert Scholler, who painted the portrait in 1987 to commemorate the bicentennial of the Constitution “to remind Americans of their responsibility for the Constitution and the freedom it brings.”²⁸ In the painting, George Washington offers the viewer a quill pen. The gesture suggests that the viewer signs the Constitution in the painting’s foreground as part of

25. “Prerequisites to Restoring the Constitution,” *Freemen Digest*, July 1978, 2, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

26. “The Inspired Declaration of Independence” and “The Inspired Constitution of the United States of America,” *Freemen Digest*, July 1978, 43, 46, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

27. *Freemen Digest*, July 1978, back cover, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

28. “About the Painting,” *Army Reserve Magazine* 33, no. 3 (1987): 14.



Figure 1. Front and back covers of the pocket Constitution published by the NCCS, in possession of author.

a recommitment to the text. Scholler's original rendering included a pledge sheet under the canvas that viewers could sign "stating that they have read or will read the Constitution and uphold its principles."²⁹ The NCCS booklet incorporates a similar move on its back cover. As the reader finishes the booklet, they are faced with the following pledge: "I, as one of *We, the People of the United States*, affirm that I have read or will read our U.S. Constitution and pledge to maintain and promote its standard of liberty for myself and for my posterity, and do hereby attest to that by my signature." Under this statement is a blank line for the reader to sign, and beneath that signature line is Washington's signature with the label: "George Washington, Witness."³⁰ The inset of the cover

29. Mary Ann Marger, "Commemorative Painting Is Touring the Country," *Tampa Bay Times* (St. Petersburg, Fla.), Oct. 10, 1987, 57.

30. NCCS, *The Constitution of the United States with Index, and The Declaration of Independence* (Malta, Idaho: National Center for Constitutional Studies, 2009), back cover.

and first page of the booklet contains quotes from George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and the *Federalist* handpicked to give the sense that these founding individuals supported modern notions of constitutional originalism: “[let us] carry ourselves back to the time when the Constitution was adopted”; limited government and individual sovereignty, “influence is no government”; and divine intervention in the founding of the Constitution, “the event is in the hand of God.”³¹ The final quote, attributed to George Washington, serves as an introduction to an opening section of “selected quotations” that preface the Constitutional text.

The first batch of “selected quotations” is titled “Observing the Hand of Providence.” Thus, the pocket Constitution shapes the reader’s experience to see religious significance as soon as the reader begins to make their way through the booklet. Tellingly, this section of quotations comes before the others titled “Preserving the Principles,” “Guarding Virtue & Freedom,” and “Educating the People,” suggesting that the Constitution’s divine origins are fundamental to understanding the other framing quotations. As with the booklet’s opening pages, Washington is again cited as explaining that events surrounding the adoption of the Constitution “demonstrate as visibly the finger of providence as any possible event in the course of human affairs can ever designate it.”³² While not referenced as such, the statement is from a May 28, 1788, letter from George Washington to Marquis de Lafayette detailing the process of ratifying the new federal Constitution.³³ Indeed, Washington’s letter proposes a supernatural intervention in the divisive and tense ratification process that followed the Constitutional

31. NCCS, *Constitution*, cover, 1.

32. NCCS, *Constitution*, iii.

33. “From George Washington to Lafayette, 28 May 1788,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/04-06-02-0264>. Original source: W. W. Abbot, ed., *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 6, 1 January 1788–23 September 1788, Confederation Series (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 297–299.

convention. This context is important for understanding Washington's appeal to providence. Without it, the quotation may mislead as it could be interpreted that Washington was speaking specifically to the drafting of the Constitution or the 1787 Convention, rather than the "change in men's minds and the progress toward rectitude in thinking and acting" that Washington detailed to Lafayette during the ratification deliberations.³⁴ Taking Washington's words out of context erases the reality of an incredibly diverse American political landscape that was the setting of the Constitutional Convention and ratification process of the closing years of the 1780s. A tendency for conservative organizations like the FI and NCCS is the assumption that the founding generation can be reduced to one voice and perspective. But as constitutional and American political historians have shown, this is simply not the case.³⁵

The next quotation from the "Observing the Hand of Providence" section is from Daniel Webster, a nineteenth-century contemporary of Joseph Smith: "I regard it [the Constitution] as the work of the purest patriots and wisest statesmen that ever existed, aided by the smiles of a benignant [gracious] Providence . . . it almost appears a Divine interposition in our behalf."³⁶ The booklet again does not cite the quotation and lets it stand alone without context. Webster's statement came from a June 1837 speech delivered at a public reception in Indiana.³⁷ Webster gave his speech during the early months of the Panic of 1837, a

34. "Washington to Lafayette," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/04-06-02-0264>. Original source: Abbot, *Papers of George Washington*, 6:297–299.

35. For example, Sean Wilentz provides a deep account of the debates, controversies, and diversity of opinions regarding the Constitution's democratic and antidemocratic elements, slavery, and the discussions surrounding the Bill of Rights. Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: From Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 13–39.

36. NCCS, *Constitution*, iii.

37. Daniel Webster, "Reception at Madison," in *The Works of Daniel Webster* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1854), 1:401–409.

monetary crisis that launched a depression, and within the context of what historian Brooks D. Simpson termed the “Cult of the Constitution.” Simpson explains that Webster was successful at oratory in part due to “his eloquence in expounding the nature and purpose of . . . the United States Constitution” and speeches that “crafted an image of the Constitution designed to further his ends, presenting it as a master plan which outlined the boundaries and limits of change while giving direction and embodying order.”³⁸ While Webster’s sentiment concerning a divinely inspired Constitution appears accurately represented, the NCCS booklet does not account for Webster’s context.

The final section of the pocket Constitution is an advertisement page that markets other publications from the NCCS. Among those presented are *The Five Thousand Year Leap* and *The Making of America*, both written by W. Cleon Skousen and published by the NCCS in the 1980s. *The Five Thousand Year Leap* places the history of the United States along a grand eschatological vision and timeline. For example, Skousen argues that “the Founders considered the whole foundation of a just society to be structured on the basis of God’s revealed law.”³⁹ Ultimately Skousen contends that revealed laws from God constitute the foundation for most laws in the world but that they were slowly but steadily perfected through the English Common Law and then into the US system, underpinned by “Judeo-Christian” principles. Further, Skousen incorrectly adds that “the Founders were not indulging in any idle gesture when they adopted the motto, ‘In God we trust.’”⁴⁰ Despite some usage in the eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, “In God

38. Brooks D. Simpson, “Daniel Webster and the Cult of the Constitution,” *Journal of American Culture* 15, no. 1 (1992): 15.

39. W. Cleon Skousen, *The 5,000 Year Leap: A Miracle That Changed the World* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Constitutional Studies, 1981): 98.

40. Skousen, *5,000 Year Leap*, 100.

We Trust” was not officially adopted during what Skousen would consider the founding generation of Americans.⁴¹

Similarly, *The Making of America* is an American history textbook that became the subject of scrutiny in the late 1980s with its inclusion of racist slurs and the conclusion that “slavery is not a racial problem. It is a human problem.”⁴² Of interest here are two other books titled *The Real George Washington: The True Story of America’s Most Indispensable Man* and *The Real Thomas Jefferson: The True Story of America’s Philosopher of Freedom*. Even the titles of these NCCS publications reveal the organization’s intentions and epistemological base. The modifier “real” before the names of the two American presidents suggests a need to set the record straight, to clarify who these people “really were,” and to fight back against prevailing trends in academic scholarship during the period.

In May 2010, conservative political commentator and Latter-day Saint Glenn Beck praised *The Real George Washington* (published 1991) on his Fox News show as part of his “Founders’ Fridays” series. Beck labeled the book “the best book ever written on George Washington” and proceeded to interview his guests, a coauthor of the book, Andrew Allison, and then-president of the NCCS, Earl Taylor. Allison explained

41. The closest and earliest usage of the phrase is in Francis Scott Key’s 1814 “The Star-Spangled Banner.” The poem’s fourth stanza reads “And this be our motto: ‘In God is Our Trust.’” While this phrase is not exactly what Skousen posits and what would much later become the United States’ official motto, it does resemble the current motto to some extent but still is outside of the periodization that most historians would consider the founding. See, Thomas Kidd, “The Origin of ‘In God We Trust,’” *Anxious Bench*, Nov. 10, 2015, accessed June 13, 2021, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2015/11/the-origin-of-in-god-we-trust/>; “History of ‘In God We Trust,’” *Department of the Treasury*, accessed June 13, 2021, <https://www.treasury.gov/about/education/pages/in-god-we-trust.aspx>.

42. W. Cleon Skousen, “The Nature of Slavery,” in *The Making of America: The Substance and Meaning of the Constitution* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Constitutional Studies, 1985), 729.

the “presumptuous” title came about because “instead of trying to interpret him for the scholars, we went out of our way to let him speak for himself, so that the American people, including young people, could find out who he is.” Taylor later in the program boasted that the book contained the word “providence,” as used by Washington, eighty-eight times. Allison continued this theme and claimed that “virtually, all of them [the founders] said that the reason that this country was created was because of the intervention of God. And nobody said it more often or more effectively than George Washington.”⁴³ In this interview, Allison aligned well with the goals of the NCCS to instruct the public about the religious influences that led to the establishment of the United States. Further, Allison’s comments reveal one of the primary motivations in writing the 1991 biography: to show that the “real” George Washington believed that God inspired the American founding.

Christian nationalist myth-making in the United States has often taken the form of imbuing historical individuals and groups with a heightened sense of Christian religiosity, even those criticized by their contemporaries as deviating from acceptable “confessional piety.”⁴⁴ As seen in the case of the pocket Constitution, a piece of Washington’s supposed religiosity by using the word “providence” attempts to demonstrate that he was both directed by God during the founding era and acknowledged the divine. According to Steven K. Green, these religious nationalists fail to recognize that “religious imagery and symbolism were the common idioms that all speakers employed when making rhetorical points.” As politicians, these individuals were effective communicators and understood the popular language of their time. Indeed, Green notes “that one can find references to God or scripture in the

43. “Glenn Beck: Founders’ Fridays: George Washington,” *Fox News*, May 10, 2010, updated Jan. 14, 2015, accessed June 4, 2021, <https://www.foxnews.com/story/glenn-beck-founders-fridays-george-washington>.

44. Steven K. Green, *Inventing a Christian America: The Myth of the Religious Founding* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 11.

political writings of the era is thus unremarkable.”⁴⁵ This is not to say that Americans, even those well-known such as Washington and Webster, did not hold religious sympathies. Rather, it is context that sheds light on the arguments put forward by those that insinuate that the founders established the United States as a Christian nation based simply upon the use of religious language.

A Divinely Inspired Constitution: Latter-day Saint Views of the United States Constitution

“I have established the constitution of this Land, by the hands of wise men whom I raised up unto this very purpose and redeemed the Land by the shedding of blood,” spoke God in Joseph Smith’s 1833 revelation.⁴⁶ As Jan Shipps has demonstrated, the 1833 revelation was produced during a time when “the people of the United States were busily engaged in the manufacture of instant heritage, substituting inspiration for antiquity with regard to the Constitution.”⁴⁷ Smith and his Latter-day Saint following believed that God establishing the United States was akin to establishing sacred geographic and political structural space for Smith’s religious innovations.⁴⁸

45. Green, *Inventing a Christian America*, 12.

46. “Revelation, 16–17 December 1833 [D&C 101],” 81, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, accessed February 14, 2021, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-16-17-december-1833-dc-101/9>.

47. Jan Shipps, “The Prophet Puzzle: Suggestions Leading Toward a More Comprehensive Interpretation of Joseph Smith,” *Journal of Mormon History* 1, (1974): 16.

48. Christopher Blythe explains that “Mormons understood this narrative in terms that cast the United States as a special land central to the tradition’s restoration project: the religious freedom available in the United States—limited as it might have been in practice—had made it possible for God to restore his church.” Blythe, *Terrible Revolution: Latter-day Saints and the American Apocalypse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 18.

The 1833 revelation contains several principles related to American religious nationalism, including the explicit notion that God personally brought about the US Constitution and, by implication, that God inspired the “wise men” who drafted it. Latter-day Saints, like Joseph Smith, were not alone in this line of thinking. Religious nationalists from an assortment of movements such as Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Unitarians, and Transcendentalists were invested in the idea of the United States as having a sacred role in human history, especially its founding documents.⁴⁹ The revelation’s evocation of redemption of land by blood connects to a trope common among Christian nationalist narratives of defending land through physical sacrifice, often violent sacrifice.⁵⁰ In the generations following Joseph Smith, the revelation has been understood as referring to the American War of Independence.⁵¹ Furthermore, Smith’s revelations connecting to the American landscape aligns with the Book of Mormon’s chosen and “promised” land narrative, which has subsequently been interpreted by many Latter-day

49. Haselby, *Origins of American Religious Nationalism*, 200. Haselby argues that “Protestant nationalists” were eager to “sacralize” the United States Constitution because of its “godlessness.” In any case, Haselby explains that Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Unitarians, and even Transcendentalists “thought patriotism a moral and religious duty. They believed that the United States of America had been chosen to play a sacred Christian role in history.”

50. Sociologist Philip Gorski explains this idea well: “[Blood sacrifice] makes religious nationalism nationalistic: religion, people, land, and polity are all cemented together with dried blood in the form of blood sacrificed to God, blood flowing in veins, blood spilled in battle, blood showering down from heaven.” Phillip Gorski, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2017). 21.

51. During the Cold War, Church leader J. Reuben Clark wrote “that the price of liberty is and always has been blood, human blood, and if our liberties are lost, we shall never regain them except at the price of blood. They must not be lost!” J. Reuben Clark, *Stand Fast by Our Constitution* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1965), 137.

Saints leaders as the United States.⁵² Sacred geography and boundary making have a long history in both Latter-day Saint history of settlement and migration and broader American Christian nationalist views of Manifest Destiny, foreign policy, imperialism, and immigration.⁵³

The need to clearly delineate and defend boundaries draws from a feeling of threat. This connects to another tenet of the Book of Mormon's narrative of a potential downfall of the promised land. The land only remains promised if those to whom it was promised hold up their end of the bargain through righteous living. As Philip Barlow notes, "These who fail become *unchosen*."⁵⁴ Sin separates the chosen people from their inheritance, thus the need to police its physical and moral boundaries.

Land is not the only thing at risk in this Mormon-nationalist vision. An 1840 Joseph Smith sermon recorded by Martha Jane Knowlton Coray is an important touch point for a Mormon claim to uniqueness in the material history of the Constitution. Smith's sermon predicted that "this nation [the United States] will be on the very verge of crumbling to pieces and tumbling to the ground and when the constitution is upon the brink of ruin this people [presumably the Church] will be the Staff up[on] which the Nation shall lean and they shall bear the

52. The most cited passage is found in Ether 2:12: "For behold, this is a land which is choice above all other lands; wherefore he that doth possess it shall serve God or shall be swept off; for it is the everlasting decree of God."

53. Perry and Whitehead consistently found that those who subscribe to Christian nationalism believe that the United States should have defined, secure, and regularly patrolled borders. They further found that support for Christian nationalism "naturally breeds xenophobia." See Andrew L. Whitehead et al., *Taking America Back for God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), chapter 3.

54. Philip L. Barlow, "Chosen Land, Chosen People: Religious and American Exceptionalism Among the Mormons," in *Mormonism and American Politics*, edited by Randall Balmer and Jana Riess (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 109.

constitution away from the <very> verge of destruction.”⁵⁵ In Latter-day Saint culture, this idea of the Constitution in peril has been understood, oftentimes inappropriately, under the wide-umbrella term “the White Horse Prophecy.”⁵⁶ In any case, these prophecies are influential sources of Mormon American exceptionalism, including how the physical, material Constitution became an icon of this idea in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Joseph Smith indeed had a unique view of the United States and its Constitution. When discussing Smith’s views of the Constitution, it is important to consider his disappointment in its shortcomings, specifically in protecting religious liberty and delivering justice upon those that violated it. Joseph Smith did not view the document as a stagnant, complete, or perfect document. Though Smith wrote that “the Constitution of the United States is a glorious standard; it is founded in the wisdom of God. It is a heavenly banner,” one should remember that he dictated those views while imprisoned in Liberty Jail in the spring of

55. “Discourse, circa 19 July 1840, as Reported by Martha Jane Knowlton Coray-B,” [13], *The Joseph Smith Papers*, accessed Feb. 14, 2021, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-circa-19-july-1840-as-reported-by-martha-jane-knowlton-coray-b/5>. For a more complete discussion of the “White Horse Prophecy,” see Don L. Penrod, “Edwin Rushton as the Source of the White Horse Prophecy,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 49, no. 3 (2010): 75–131.

56. Christopher Blythe describes some of the key elements of the prophecy explaining that Joseph Smith predicted a future apocalyptic scene of the four horsemen of the apocalypse to “describe distinct American populations” and “an impending American revolution,” violence where “Father would be against Son & Son against the Father,” and foretold that the “White Horse [a symbol of the Mormon people] would send missionaries out to the Pale Horse (non-Mormon Euro-Americans) ‘to get the Honest among them . . . to Stand by the Constitution of the United States’ in the West.” For further in-depth discussion of this prophecy, see Blythe, *Terrible Revolution*, 139, 206–210.

1839.⁵⁷ Smith believed that the Constitution was erected to protect religious liberty but also acknowledged its deficiencies, especially as he was imprisoned from November 1838 to April 1839 due in part because of religious intolerance in antebellum Missouri.⁵⁸ For Smith, the Constitution was divinely inspired. But part of its divinity was its adaptability. Smith advocated amending the Constitution if it lacked in protections and power to enforce the rights of religious minorities.⁵⁹

In the context of religious persecution in the 1830s and 1840s, Joseph Smith and other Latter-day Saints began to articulate a concept of theodemocracy as an adaptation of the Constitution's approach to earthly governance and relationship with the divine. According

57. "Letter to Edward Partridge and the Church, circa 22 March 1839," 8, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-edward-partridge-and-the-church-circa-22-march-1839/8>.

58. For example, in 1843, Willard Richards reported that Smith said that he was "the greatest advocate of the Constitution of the United States there is on the earth . . . the only fault I find with the Constitution, is, it is not broad enough to cover the whole ground. Although it provides that all men shall enjoy religious freedom, yet it does not provide the manner by which that freedom can be preserved, nor for the punishment of government officers who refuse to protect the people in their religious rights, or punish those mobs, states, or communities, who interfere with the rights of the people on account of their religion. Its sentiments are good, but it provides no means of enforcing them." "History, 1838–1856, volume E-1 [1 July 1843–30 April 1844]," 1754, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-e-1-1-july-1843-30-april-1844/126>.

59. Historian Spencer W. McBride has shown that "it would take a civil war and the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868," along with "several more decades for the federal government to consistently apply the free exercise of religion clause to individual states" to combat the afflictions that religious minorities, such as Catholics and Mormons, experienced in the antebellum United States. Spencer W. McBride, *Joseph Smith for President: The Prophet, the Assassins, and the Fight for American Religious Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 214.

to historian Nathan Jones's characterization of Smith's "alternative to American democracy," theodemocracy "was premised on the expectation that the citizens of Zion would use their free will to voluntarily unify behind God's will, as he transmitted to them through his prophets."⁶⁰ In Smith's estimation, democracy and republican forms of government only worked when those who participated were righteous and aligned their own desires with those of God.⁶¹ Patrick Mason has identified the balance of sovereignty between God and the people as "Smith's ideal government." Smith and his followers believed that "only in such a society would inalienable human rights, dignity, and freedom be protected."⁶² Theodemocracy would not look like a pure democracy that appealed to the will of the public majority nor the divine edicts of an "aristocracy of clerics, as God's regents." Instead, to Smith, "God and the people held power jointly."⁶³ Thus, theodemocracy countered the ill excesses of both republicanism and theocracy because it relied upon the virtue of the people who participated in the political process.⁶⁴ Understandably, this religiopolitical conception would face difficult realities. How would the system perfectly balance the interests of the *theos* and the *demos*? In Patrick Mason's assessment, nineteenth-century Mormonism "assigned ultimate meaning and power to the

60. Nathan L. Jones, "In the Nation of Promise: Mormon Political Thought in Modern America," (PhD diss., University of Utah, 2019), 8.

61. Benjamin E. Park, *Kingdom of Nauvoo: The Rise and Fall of a Religious Empire on the American Frontier* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2020), 199.

62. Patrick Q. Mason, "God and the People: Theodemocracy in Nineteenth-Century Mormonism," *Journal of Church and State* 53, no. 3 (2011): 358.

63. Mason, "God and the People," 371.

64. David Walker explains that "theodemocracy critiqued also republicanism's perceived shortcomings: excessive individualism, economic dislocation, the failure to acknowledge God as supreme lawgiver, and the continuing prevalence of state and mob violence constraining religious liberties." David Walker, *Railroading Religion: Mormons, Tourists, and the Corporate Spirit of the West* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 51.

sacred and . . . placed . . . high priority on conforming to the revealed decrees of God's chosen messengers, *demos* clearly played a subservient role to *theos*.⁶⁵ No clearer was this negotiation evident than when Joseph Smith directed the Nauvoo Council of Fifty to "draft a constitution that featured those principles they felt the US Constitution lacked," as historian Benjamin E. Park has demonstrated, including a passed motion to declare Smith "Prophet, Priest & King" in the new theocratic-democratic blended government.⁶⁶ This renegotiation that places a higher status to *theos* over *demos* is also clear in the packaging of the NCCS pocket Constitution.

Joseph Smith's successor, Brigham Young, felt similarly to Smith about the Constitution. In 1854, Young expressed that when it came to the founding generation, signers of the Declaration and framers of the Constitution were "inspired from on high to do that work" but also that the Constitution was not perfect.⁶⁷ Young and his Latter-day Saint contemporaries in the mid-nineteenth century felt that the evolution of the Constitution was necessary. More importantly, Saints from the Utah territorial period believed that the nation was corrupt and that God would punish America because of its treatment of Latter-day Saints.⁶⁸

65. Mason, "God and the People," 371.

66. Park, *Kingdom of Nauvoo*, 201–204.

67. On the question of whether the Constitution could be changed, Young affirmed that "it can" and that the framers of the Constitution "laid the foundation, and it was for after generations to rear the superstructure upon it. It is a progressive—a gradual work." Brigham Young, "Celebration of the Fourth of July," address given July 4, 1854, in *Journal of Discourses* (Liverpool: Amasa Lyman, 42 Islington, 1860): 7:14, <https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/JournalOfDiscourses3/id/3130>.

68. For example, Christopher Blythe shows how Latter-day Saints saw the Civil War as divine judgment because of persecution endured by Latter-day Saints in Missouri, Illinois, and Utah, especially the recent "Utah War" of 1857. Blythe, *Terrible Revolution*, 130–178.

While the nation and American culture would inevitably degrade and fall from God's favor, Latter-day Saints still believed in the divinity of the Constitution. This included the belief in restoring it, as per Joseph Smith's prophecy, in helping it to fulfill its divine function as a protector of religious freedom and as something that would eventually be replaced by the imminent return of Jesus Christ with the institution of a Kingdom of God on Earth.⁶⁹ Latter-day Saints remained faithful to the Constitution, despite persistent attacks on the Mormon practice of plural marriage through the remainder of the nineteenth century. Historians have shown how Mormons "Americanized" following the 1890 Wilford Woodruff Manifesto that nominally put an end to polygamy. Most Americans then considered Latter-day Saints assimilated into the American cultural mainstream by the mid-twentieth century.⁷⁰

69. John Taylor expressed this sentiment in the waning weeks of the American Civil War: "We expect to see a universal chaos of religious and political sentiment, and an uncertainty much more serious than anything that exists at the present time. We look forward to the time; and try to help it on, when God will assert his own right with regard to the government of the earth; when, as in religious matters so in political matters, he will enlighten the minds of those that bear rule, he will teach the kings wisdom and instruct the senators by the Spirit of eternal truth; when to him 'every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is the Christ.'" John Taylor, "Remarks Made in the Tabernacle," reported by E. L. Sloan, Mar. 5, 1865, in *Just and Holy Principles: Latter-day Saint Readings on America and the Constitution*, edited by Ralph C. Hancock (Needham Heights, MA: Pearson Custom Publishing, 1998), 30.

70. The elements of Alexander's narrative that culminate in the "Americanization" of Mormonism consist of the following: abandonment of polygamy in favor of monogamy, theocracy in favor of the American republicanism (especially its two-party system), economic communalism in deference to pure American capitalism, and ecclesiastical evolution in the form of modern administrative bureaucracy, auxiliary organizations, and systematic formulations of doctrine, especially with the Word of Wisdom as a marker of good standing. What is unfortunately missing from this narrative are voices of "the laity" (what Blythe refers to via Primiano as "vernacular religion"), discussions of race (the Black priesthood and temple ban, relations with American Indians, Hawaiian immigration, etc.), and the complicated gender power dynamics

J. Reuben Clark, who became a counselor in the Church's highest governing body, First Presidency, in the early 1930s, heavily influenced Latter-day Saint discourse on the Constitution in the early to mid-twentieth century.⁷¹ In the 1930s, Clark became an outspoken

inherent in the burgeoning administrative system. Thomas Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints, 1890–1930*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2012). Further, Kathleen Flake has shown how the prominent Reed Smoot Senate hearings in the opening decade of the twentieth century served as a major turning point in Latter-day Saints proving their Americanness as President Joseph F. Smith issued another manifesto prohibiting plural marriages and disciplined high-ranking Church officials for their failure to adhere to the original 1890 manifesto. The United States Senate and anti-Mormon interest groups in America had to give as well. The capitulation on the “Mormon problem” on the part of the United States came not only in the form of seating Senator Smoot but in curtailing its efforts to regulate the Church as a corporation in the ways the US Congress had been intervening in the economy for the preceding two decades through antitrust legislation. In the end, Flake succinctly posits that the “Mormon problem” that had plagued the United States for over half a century “was solved finally because the Mormons had figured out how to act more like an American church, a civil religion; the Senate, less like one” Kathleen Flake, *The Politics of American Religious Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 158. Christopher Blythe has further demonstrated that this Americanization process included an expansion of the Church's hierarchical role to moderate the Church's theological, and in this case apocalyptic, tenets. Blythe argues that Church leaders were successful in their efforts to “Americanize” the apocalypse by regulating lay visions, revelations, and dreams that cast the United States in an antagonistic role and instead opted to demonstrate their loyalty to the United States by supporting the Spanish-American War, disregarding the Ghost Dance, and officially disavowing the White Horse Prophecy. Blythe shows, like Flake, how the Church hierarchy forwarded reinterpretations in Church history and the prophecies of Joseph Smith to reorient the Church's views toward the United States. Rather than vengefully calling upon God to smite the inhabitants of the United States for the murder of Joseph Smith, leaders emphasized their commitment to the Constitution due to its divine origins. Blythe, *Terrible Revolution*, 185, 213.

71. After a public career as US under secretary of state (1928–1929) and ambassador to Mexico (1930–1933), Clark, trained at Columbia Law School, became

critic of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal policies. Much in part to Clark's influence and efforts, the Church developed a self-sufficient welfare plan designed to help Latter-day Saints rid themselves of federal monetary assistance.⁷² As with Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, Clark did not necessarily think the Constitution was a perfect document, despite its divinity.⁷³ Though Clark left room for the Constitution's adaptation, such adaptation was only appropriate within the aims of his and other conservatives' political worldview.

A staunch conservative, Clark often praised the US Constitution in church and public settings. During the Eisenhower administration, Clark's views aligned well with a growing trend to posit the United States

a counselor in the Church's First Presidency in 1933 during the Great Depression. Clark remained in the influential leadership position for the remainder of his life acting as the second counselor from 1933–1934 and 1951–1959 under Presidents Grant and McKay and as first counselor from 1934 to 1951 and 1959 to 1961 under Presidents Grant, Smith, and McKay. For more on J. Reuben Clark's life and influence on the Church, see D. Michael Quinn, *Elder Statesman: A Biography of J. Reuben Clark* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002); D. Michael Quinn, *J. Reuben Clark: The Church Years* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1983); and Frank W. Fox, *J. Reuben Clark: The Public Years* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1980).

72. The plan was successful and revered by conservatives across the country, despite how lay Latter-day Saints in the "Mormon Corridor" (Utah, Idaho, Nevada, Arizona) voiced their political preferences by voting in overwhelming numbers for President Roosevelt and disproportionately received New Deal federal funds during the Great Depression. See Dave Hall, *A Faded Legacy: Amy Brown Lyman and Mormon Women's Activism, 1872–1959* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2015), 104–125.

73. On November 16, 1938, Clark gave an address before the annual convention of the American Bankers Association in Houston, Texas, on "Constitutional Government: Our Birthright Threatened," in which he stated, "It is not my belief nor is it the doctrine of my Church that the Constitution is a fully-grown document. On the contrary, we believe it must grow and develop to meet the changing needs of an advanced world." J. Reuben Clark, "Constitutional Government—Our Birthright Threatened," Nov. 16, 1938, in Hancock, *Just and Holy Principles*, 103.

as a Christian nation.⁷⁴ However, Clark continued a unique Latter-day Saint tradition of reverencing the Constitution as a divinely inspired document, a nod toward its authority and its equation with Latter-day Saint scripture. In a 1957 address, Clark declared that the Constitution was “an integral part of my religious faith. It is a revelation from the Lord.”⁷⁵ Clark’s views about the inherent religiosity of the United States also fall into line with some of the motivations behind the new addition of “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance and the adoption of “In God We Trust” as a national motto: to combat atheistic communism. This political and cultural thrust of “Christian libertarianism” began in the 1930s and 1940s as corporations adopted Christian language to advance their capitalist interests in response to the New Deal.⁷⁶ Christian free enterprise, a blending of Christianity and libertarian free market advocacy, developed through the twentieth century.⁷⁷ The ideals of self-sufficiency, lack of governmental intervention in the market, “family values,” Christian-condoned mass consumption, and a defense against atheistic communism drove this cultural strand among what

74. On June 14, 1954, Congress passed a joint resolution adding the words “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance, and two years later, the phrase “In God We Trust” was adopted by the United States as its official motto and placed on American currency. Kevin Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 95–125.

75. The remainder of Clark’s talk speaks to the liberal assault on the Constitution with the establishment of federal agencies and the expansion of the welfare state during the Great Depression. J. Reuben Clark, “Our Constitution—Divinely Inspired” (address at the General Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Tabernacle, Salt Lake City, Apr. 6, 1957).

76. Kruse, *One Nation Under God*.

77. Bethany Moreton has demonstrated that “faith in God and faith in the market grew in tandem [through the postwar period], aided by a generous government and an organized, corporate-funded grassroots movement for Christian free enterprise. Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 5.

would become the New Right and Moral Majority of the 1970s and 1980s.

The most ardent anticommunist to come through the ranks of Latter-day Saint leadership was Ezra Taft Benson (1899–1994), who became a Church apostle in 1943 and eventually the Church president in 1985. Benson believed that members of the Church were destined to save the Constitution from the destructive hands of liberal Americans and the threats of socialism and communism.⁷⁸ In 1952, the Eisenhower administration tapped Benson to serve as secretary of agriculture. The First Presidency, which consisted of McKay, Clark, and Stephen L. Richards, gave Benson a special blessing to prepare him to fight communism during his presidential cabinet service.⁷⁹ Benson went on to level heavy critiques against progressive policies and supposed communist influences in the United States, including within Eisenhower’s administration.⁸⁰

78. Matthew L. Harris, *Watchman on the Tower: Ezra Taft Benson and the Making of the Mormon Right* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020), 9.

79. In the blessing, McKay blessed Benson to have the capacity and ability to fight communism, including that he “might see . . . the enemies who would thwart the freedoms of the individual as vouchsafed by the Constitution.” Quoted in Harris, *Watchman on the Tower*, 31–32.

80. At the heart of Benson’s commitment to fighting communism was his belief in the necessity of protecting the Constitution from “secret combinations,” or satanic-inspired conspiracy attacks that he believed had been prophesied of in the Book of Mormon that sought to deprive freedom-loving people of their liberty and free agency. See Ether 8 in the Book of Mormon. Verse 22 explains that “whatsoever nation shall uphold such secret combinations, to get power and gain, until they shall spread over the nation, behold, they shall be destroyed.” Benson saw the spread of communism and its infiltration in the United States as fulfilment of prophecy by the Book of Mormon: “A secret combination that seeks to overthrow the freedom of all lands, nations, and countries is increasing its evil influence and control over America and the entire world.” Ezra Taft Benson, “I Testify,” *Ensign*, 18, no. 11, Nov. 1988, <https://abn.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1988/11/i-testify?lang=eng>.

In 1959, Church President David O. McKay encouraged Latter-day Saints in General Conference to read W. Cleon Skousen's 1958 book *The Naked Communist*, calling it an "excellent book."⁸¹ Benson gave a similar endorsement calling it a "timely book."⁸² Skousen's work, including *The Naked Communist*, was widely read among anticommunist organizations, such as the John Birch Society and the All-American Society, the latter of which was founded in Salt Lake City in 1961.⁸³ *The Naked Communist* outlines a communist plot to take over the world's governments and essentially enslave humanity according to the precepts of Soviet communism.⁸⁴ Not only did McKay endorse Skousen's book, but he had also asked him to write it.⁸⁵ As ninth president of the Church, David O. McKay directed the Church from April 1951 until his death in January 1970. As such, his near-two decades of leadership coincided with some of the major developments in American anticommunism during the early decades of the Cold War. McKay's views on communism were not unlike other Americans during this period, and he held views like other Latter-day Saint leaders on the divine purposes of the Constitution.⁸⁶

As a counselor in the Church's First Presidency in 1939, McKay explained that second only to worshipping God, "there is nothing in this world upon which this Church should be more united than in

81. David O. McKay, "Preach the Word," *Improvement Era* 62, Dec. 1959, 912.

82. Ezra Taft Benson, Report of the Semi-Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, April 1960 (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, semiannual), 9.

83. "Society Formed," *Deseret News*, Sept. 12, 1961, 12A.

84. W. Cleon Skousen, *The Naked Communist* (Salt Lake City: Ensign Publishing, 1962), 253–258.

85. Harris, *Watchman on the Tower*, 44.

86. Gregory A. Prince and Wm. Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2005), 279–322.

upholding and defending the Constitution.”⁸⁷ While he was serving as second counselor, the First Presidency issued its official statement on communism, one that he and other leaders would regularly cite in the coming decades: “Since Communism, established, would destroy our American Constitutional government, to support Communism is treasonable to our free institutions, and no patriotic American citizen may become a communist or supporter of communism. . . . Communism being thus hostile to loyal American citizenship and incompatible with true Church membership, of necessity no loyal American citizen and no faithful Church member can be a Communist.”⁸⁸ Thus, McKay and the First Presidency aligned with a growing dichotomous relationship between the US Constitution and communism, with a God-inspired system and a Satanic plot underlying each.⁸⁹ Two aspects fundamentally defined the Church’s opposition to communism: state-established atheism and the denial of free agency.

To Latter-day Saints during the mid-twentieth century, the fear of communism struck at the Church’s most treasured principles. Foremost among these was the concept of free agency, the idea that central to one’s purpose in mortality is making righteous decisions without being compelled to do so by an outside force.⁹⁰ Latter-day Saint scripture

87. David O. McKay, “Warning Given Against Foes Within Nation,” *Deseret News*, Oct. 9, 1939, 5.

88. First Presidency, “Warning to Church Members,” Jul. 3, 1936, *Improvement Era* 39, no. 8, Aug. 1936, 488.

89. McKay made this division even more clear in his restatement of the Church’s position on communism in 1966: “We consider it the greatest Satanical threat to peace, prosperity, and the spread of God’s work among men that exists on the face of the earth.” David O. McKay, “Meet Sets Forth Priesthood Ideals,” *Deseret News*, Apr. 11, 1966, 4.

90. President McKay remarked on the principle that “next to the bestowal of life itself, the right to direct that life is God’s greatest gift to man.” David O. McKay, “The Cause of Human Liberty: The Doctrine of Free Agency,” in *Gospel Ideals* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1953), 299. McKay further held

holds that “men are free according to the flesh . . . and they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil.”⁹¹ Latter-day Saint voices, such as Benson and Skousen, powerfully combined the doctrine of free agency and libertarianism in a way that made them look inseparable.⁹² This language on the principle of free agency has become intertwined with the patriotic rhetoric concerning American ideals of “life” and “liberty,” making the connection between the United States and its Constitution as necessary elements for the establishment of Mormonism that much easier to make.

A Performing Pocket Constitution on the National Stage

With the necessary context to understand the religious and political forces that underpin the NCCS pocket Constitution, this section seeks to bring to light the pamphlet’s implications when featured on the national stage. The visible nature of the pocket Constitution in the media places it within view of millions of people instantly. The NCCS pocket Constitution first came under wide scrutiny in 2013 when the state of Florida halted the purchase and distribution of it as part of a statewide civics program. Florida officials had purchased eighty

that “freedom of choice is more to be treasured than any possession earth can give. It is inherent in the spirit of man.” McKay, “The Cause of Human Liberty,” 299.

91. 2 Nephi 2:27. In a revelation to Joseph Smith in 1830, the Lord revealed concerning Adam that “I gave unto him that he should be an agent unto himself,” explaining that from the beginning of humanity’s existence the idea of free choice was paramount to God’s plan for humanity. “Revelation, September 1830–A [D&C 29],” 39, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, accessed June 8, 2021, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-september-1830-a-dc-29/4>.

92. Matthew Bowman, “The Cold War and the Invention of Free Agency,” in *Thunder from the Right: Ezra Taft Benson in Mormonism and Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 166–168.

thousand copies of the pocket Constitution and sent them to public schools across the state.⁹³ The purchase, which totaled \$24,150, was heavily criticized by the American Civil Liberties Union of Florida and by Florida Supreme Court Justice Fred Lewis who ordered the cessation of distribution. Lewis acted in the wake of an article by the *Tampa Bay Times* that described the NCCS mission and historical context, including its view of the relationship between church and state.⁹⁴ While its time in the Florida education system was short, the fact that it was initially approved suggests either a willingness to support the pocket Constitution's framing or its subtle ability to make its way into places of influence.

The last decade saw multiple examples of how the legacy of the NCCS pocket Constitution has made its way into the national consciousness. First, during the 2014 and 2016 standoffs between the federal government and the Bundys, Ammon and Cliven Bundy ensured that the pocket Constitution made its way into the national media coverage of the event, with the NCCS pocket Constitution always within their shirt breast pocket. In this instance, the NCCS Constitution came to embody a particular nationalist apocalyptic and western (regional) libertarian interpretation of both the Constitution and the Latter-day Saint faith. A final striking example considered here, introduced at the beginning, was Mike Lee brandishing the pocket Constitution in the US Senate Chamber during the October 2020 Senate confirmation hearings for Supreme Court then-nominee Amy Coney Barrett.

Like so many Latter-day Saints, Cliven Bundy believes in a divinely inspired Constitution. However, it is not clear that many Latter-day Saints believe, as Bundy does, that Jesus Christ himself authored the

93. Peter Jamison, "Civics Program Pulls 'Pocket Constitutions,'" *Tampa Bay Times* (St. Petersburg, Fla.), Dec. 12, 2013, B1.

94. Jamison, "Civics Program," B5.

Constitution.⁹⁵ Bundy's equation of the Constitution with direct revelation from God evokes distinctly Latter-day Saint ideas about the role and nature of the founding document. For Cliven Bundy, his family, and his likeminded associates, the Constitution holds a special material and ideological power.⁹⁶ Beyond simply subscribing to a particular worldview and interpretation of the Constitution's content on the role of government, the Bundys perform what I call the "corporeality of the Constitution." By this, I argue that in certain situations, such as the 2014 and 2016 Bundy standoffs, the physical pocket Constitution does not only represent a distinct religiopolitical worldview but begins to act on its own as an object that performs itself. As the actors wield the Constitution toward the popular media—especially through photographs—it becomes an actor itself, alongside those that believe in what it represents.

In April of 2014, Cliven Bundy and a group of like-minded antigovernment agitators engaged in a confrontation with the US Bureau of Land Management. From the government's point of view, the dispute came down to Bundy, a Nevada cattle rancher, not paying his grazing fees and use of federal land. For Bundy, the dispute was rooted in a fundamental political and theological problem that pitted himself and other ranchers against an overreaching and godless government that sought to strip them of their rights as Americans and overstepped its constitutionally granted powers to manage public lands. The standoff in Bunkerville, Nevada, received widespread national media attention.

95. Betsy Gaines Quammen, *American Zion: Cliven Bundy, God & Public Lands in the West* (Salt Lake City: Torrey House Press, 2020), 178–179.

96. For thorough treatment of the Cliven and Ammon Bundy protests and standoffs, see Betsy Gaines Quammen, *American Zion: Cliven Bundy, God & Public Lands in the West* (Salt Lake City: Torrey House Press, 2020) and John L. Smith, *Saints, Sinners, and Sovereign Citizens: The Endless War over the West's Public Lands* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2020).

The NCCS pocket Constitution featured prominently in photographs and interviews that sought to present these events to the public.

In January 2016, Ammon Bundy and various rightwing militia groups (including Citizens for Constitutional Freedom) occupied the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon. This episode featured the most cameos of the pocket Constitution. From the beginning of the occupation, Ammon Bundy assured that concerns about the material and conceptual fate of the Constitution were central to his messaging. In a YouTube video posted on January 1, 2016, Bundy appears sitting at a table in his home in his usual brimmed hat and plaid shirt, with the NCCS pocket Constitution peeping from his shirt pocket. In the video posted prior to the armed takeover of the wildlife refuge, Ammon explains that if he and the other ranchers did “not stand we will have nothing to pass on.” He further evoked previously discussed Mormon prophecies about the Constitution, explaining that it was “hanging by a thread” due to “blatant violations” by the federal government.⁹⁷

Ammon Bundy received this worldview, and subsequently propagated it, thanks to his father Cliven’s radical Christian libertarian political philosophy infused with Mormon doctrine. The most potent source of this worldview is found in a scrapbook of sorts called the *Nay Book*, named after its compiler, Keith Nay, one of Bundy’s neighbors. The *Nay Book* is a manifesto of sorts that justifies antigovernment actions, couched in religious rhetoric and supported by statements from Latter-day Saint leaders, notably Ezra Taft Benson. Journalist Leah Sottile, who was granted access to it, explained that to its adherents, the *Nay Book* “provided proof of the link” between the Bundys’ religiopolitical philosophy, their antigovernment activities, and their affiliation

97. Ammon Bundy, “Dear Friends,” January 1, 2016, YouTube video, 19:27, accessed Nov. 10, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7M0mG6HUyk>.

as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.⁹⁸ In a vernacular text that meshes holy writ (from the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, etc.) with prophetic statements, and infused with a distinct Western American libertarian philosophy, the Nay Book provided a rationale for standing up to the federal government. A central tenet to this worldview is an understanding that Latter-day Saints have a special responsibility to protect the divinely inspired Constitution from diabolical attack.

The NCCS pocket Constitution—whether tucked away yet visible in a protestor’s shirt pocket or waved violently alongside chants—was symbolic. Its presence was similar to how media and theater studies scholar Lindsay Livingston described the weapons that the Bundys and their compatriots brandished on I-15 during the 2014 standoff: “The guns themselves actually *performed*.”⁹⁹ Those who brandish the pocket Constitution do not need to explain why they are doing so as the visual presentation of it communicates the message—here is the document that represents our goals, our families, and our religiopolitical worldview. The NCCS pocket Constitution is in “a state of performative becoming,” as it evokes usage in the past and suggests it will be used in the future.¹⁰⁰ It acts as a reminder of a sacred history of which its possessor holds “insider status.” In other words, the one brandishing the pocket Constitution has insider knowledge about the “true” purpose and nature of the Constitution, including that they possess lost truth

98. Leah Sottile, “Bundyville Chapter Two: By a Thread,” *LongReads*, May 2018, accessed Nov. 10, 2021, <https://longreads.com/2018/05/16/bundyville-chapter-two-by-a-thread/>.

99. Lindsay Livingston, “Brandishing Guns: Performing Race and Belonging in the American West,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 17, no. 3 (2018): 345.

100. Livingston, “Brandishing Guns,” 348.

about its Christian heritage and principles.¹⁰¹ The NCCS Constitution evokes notions of a redemptive future or the need to redeem what has been lost—the sacred past and insider knowledge that has been ripped away by “secularists,” “leftists,” or any other individual or group that tries to divorce the Constitution from its “original” and “true meaning.”

A quick sampling of media in response to the 2016 protests shows how the pocket Constitution became a Bundy character of its own. In addition to Ammon Bundy’s January YouTube video, an array of national media featured it. For example, the primary photograph accompanying a January 2016 *Los Angeles Times* article depicts Jon Ritzheimer, dressed in a militia jacket, sitting in the driver’s seat of a vehicle with an iPhone showing a picture of his family in one hand and the NCCS pocket Constitution in the other (figure 2).¹⁰² This fascinating juxtaposition suggests that for Ritzheimer, family and Constitution are equally valuable motivations to signal to the world as he prepares for spiritual and political battle. He also evokes the image of a

101. For more on the idea of an “insider” perspective for Christian nationalists, see Lauren Kerby’s treatment in *Saving History: How White Evangelicals Tour the Nation’s Capital and Redeem a Christian America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 14–15 and chapter 1. Kerby explains that this “insider narrative tells the story of an America founded by devout white Christian men and blessed by their God. It is imperative to note the narrow and anachronistic meaning of Christian in this context: it designates a kind of conservative evangelicalism more familiar to twentieth-century culture warriors than to the Founding Fathers. According to this narrative, however, the American founders intended that the nation’s leaders and citizens would be Christian in this narrow sense. As long as this was the case, the nation prospered. In this story, Christians—specifically white evangelicals—are the rightful insiders in the United States, and the nation’s well-being depends upon their cultural and political dominance.”

102. Nigel Duara, “Oregon Armed Protestors Invoke the Constitution—Annotated by a Conspiracy Theorist,” *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 21, 2016, accessed Nov. 9, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-ff-oregon-standoff-constitution-20160121-story.html>.



Figure 2. Jon Ritzheimer with a NCCS pocket Constitution and a picture of his family at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge near Burns, Oregon, during the 2016 occupation.

law enforcement officer flashing their badge to present identification along with authority, implying justification for whatever is to follow. Ritzheimer, a former marine, posted a video like Bundy's the month before the armed takeover in which he explained his future involvement while waving the pocket Constitution to the camera.¹⁰³

Other photographs show leader Ammon Bundy with the head of George Washington on the Constitution pamphlet peeking out from

103. Peter Holley, "The 'Unhinged' Oregon Protestor That the FBI has been Tracking for Months," *Washington Post*, Jan. 5, 2016, accessed Nov. 10, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/01/05/why-a-notorious-anti-islam-radical-turned-on-the-federal-government-in-oregon/>; Carli Brosseau, "'Rogue Infidel' Jon Ritzheimer among Oregon Wildlife Refuge Occupiers," *Oregonian*, Jan. 5, 2016, https://www.oregonlive.com/pacific-northwest-news/2016/01/rogue_infidel_jon_ritzheimer_a.html.



Figure 3. Ammon Bundy addressing the American Academy for Constitutional Education in Mesa, Arizona, in 2014 with the NCCS pocket Constitution in his shirt pocket.

his jacket breast pocket (figure 3).¹⁰⁴ The parallel gazes from Ammon Bundy and the likeness of Washington elevate the pocket Constitution's presence as if Washington himself were captured in the photograph. These images, and dozens of others, demonstrate that the pocket Constitution became a symbol of, and also an actor in, the Bundy cause. Imagining its absence is difficult because of how tightly associated the pocket Constitution became with the Bundys' worldview and activities.

Through obvious antigovernment activities and media posturing, the Bundys imbue the pocket Constitution with special material power.

104. Gordon Friedman and Melanie Eversley, "1 Killed as Feds Move In, Arrest Protest Leader Ammon Bundy," *USA Today*, Jan. 26, 2016, accessed Nov. 9, 2021, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2016/01/26/reports-protest-group-leader-ammon-bundy-arrested/79380650/>.

It becomes corporeal—substantial, present, and concrete—not simply a booklet of paper pages but a demanding physical presence with potentially violent associations. With the pamphlet’s dominating portrait of Washington, the Constitution becomes anthropomorphized—with Washington himself embodying the Constitution. Further, this idea of a corporeal Constitution becomes even more evident in the context of Latter-day Saint prophecies concerning its fate and threatened destruction. The idea of the Constitution “hanging by a thread” suggests the physical materiality of the document. While understood as metaphor—saving the “idea” or “concepts” of the Constitution—the Bundys emphasize the materiality of the Constitution as a physical, tangible thing. The choice on the part of the Bundys to physically wave, pocket, and brandish the pocket Constitution grants the document a life of its own.

This practice occurs in other public performances as well. In his opening speech discussing the nomination of Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett on October 12, 2020, Senator Mike Lee held up a NCCS pocket Constitution and enthusiastically proclaimed, “This is a thing that works, and works best when every one of us reads it, understands it, and takes and honors an oath to uphold it and protect it and defend it. When we do our jobs in this branch, when our friends in the executive branch do their jobs, it requires us to follow the Constitution just the same way” (figure 4).¹⁰⁵ To some or most observers, Mike Lee’s role in invoking the NCCS pocket Constitution on national television is benign and unnoteworthy. However, despite the defense of Lee’s spokesperson Conn Carroll that Lee “was not aware” that he was holding the NCCS version, the Utah senator’s affiliation with both the messages in the pocket Constitution itself and its publisher is no accident.

105. Mike Lee, “Senator Lee Opening Statement at SCOTUS Hearing,” *Mike Lee Senator for Utah*, Oct. 12, 2020, accessed June 14, 2021, <https://www.lee.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2020/10/senator-lee-opening-statement-at-scotus-hearing>.



Figure 4. Utah Senator Mike Lee (R-Utah) holding up the NCCS pocket Constitution in the US Capitol Senate Chamber during the October 12, 2020, Senate confirmation hearing of Supreme Court Justice nominee Amy Coney Barrett.

After Mike Lee won Utah’s junior US Senate seat in 2010, W. Cleon Skousen’s son, Paul, told the *New York Times* that “Mike Lee is a good friend of the family, and we support him 100 percent. . . . He’s read Dad’s books; he had Dad in his home when he was growing up for visits and dinners, and he met Dad on a number of occasions before Dad passed away.”¹⁰⁶ Apart from the apparent influence of Skousen on Mike Lee during his childhood, Lee’s platforms align well with the religious and political vision for America espoused by Skousen during his career through much of the twentieth century. For example, both Skousen and Lee believe in the unconstitutionality of federal agencies like the

106. Jeffrey Rosen, “Radical Constitutionalism,” *New York Times*, Nov. 26, 2010, accessed June 14, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/28/magazine/28FOB-idealab-t.html>.

Environmental Protection Agency and the Federal Communications Commission, advocate for the repeal of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Amendments to the Constitution, call for the eradication of Social Security, decry the development of the American welfare state, and bemoan the national debt.¹⁰⁷

Most importantly, Lee and Skousen both believe in a divinely inspired Constitution and are convinced of a diabolical attack by those who wish to suspend the freedoms it protects. In a February 2021 Conservative Political Action Conference speech at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Mike Lee identified local and federal government gathering restrictions due to the ongoing virus threat as evidence of the Left's attack on freedom. Specifically, Lee believed that the assembly restrictions attacked American citizens' ability to practice their faith, stating that "freedom of religion depends on it [the right to assemble]. . . . We've been prevented from gathering in our churches," while also expressing his terror that the political Left's "sole agenda is putting more faith in government. And as a result, they take steps inevitably to make us less free."¹⁰⁸ He believed that the Obama administration and the subsequent Democratic coalition that sought to limit the influence of the Trump administration during his four-year term were part of the attack on the divinely inspired Constitution.

Early in his senatorial career, Mike Lee expressed his sentiments concerning the divinity of the founding document. In 2010, as a senatorial candidate, Lee appealed to his Utah Latter-day Saint base: "In my faith, the LDS faith, we do feel the Constitution has divine origins" and that the Constitution is something that "a religious person will regard as

107. Rosen, "Radical Constitutionalism."

108. Lee Davidson, "Mike Lee Argues the Left Is Attacking the Bill of Rights," *Salt Lake Tribune*, Feb. 26, 2021, accessed June 14, 2021, <https://www.sltrib.com/news/politics/2021/02/26/mike-lee-argues-left-is/>.

sacred.”¹⁰⁹ After winning the election, Lee repeated his campaign rhetoric that “this is a great land, and that governing document was written by wise men offered up by divine providence.”¹¹⁰ Further, in 2015, Lee expressed that his view about a sacred Constitution is “consistent with the doctrinal view: I believe that the Constitution was written by wise men, raised up by God to that very purpose,” but he was careful not to suggest that it was equal with scripture. Rather, Lee asserted that the Constitution “is a special document that needs to be revered.”¹¹¹

Thus, Mike Lee waving the NCCS pocket Constitution in the US Senate chamber on national television was not a mistake. It represented a material and distilled lens through which the Utah senator had built his congressional career and his religiopolitical worldview. Lee’s declaration that the Constitution “is a thing that works” when Americans read and understand the document goes hand in hand with the goals of the former FI and current NCCS. What is more is the annotated text of the pocket Constitution he “wasn’t aware” he was holding contains explicit Christian nationalist views on the divinity of the Constitution and the religious founding of the United States, views that Lee, and his political predecessors like Cleon Skousen, believed and taught.

Interestingly, other Latter-day Saint national politicians such as Orrin Hatch and Mitt Romney do not suggest these same beliefs. Both Hatch and Romney regularly have evoked their faith in public

109. Lisa Riley Roche, “Mike Lee Keeps His Eye on the Constitution as He Prepares for General Election Race,” *Deseret News*, July 23, 2010, accessed June 14, 2021, <https://www.deseret.com/2010/7/24/20129717/mike-lee-keeps-his-eye-on-the-constitution-as-he-prepares-for-general-election-race>.

110. Thomas Burr, “Lee Sworn In as Utah’s Newest Senator,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, Jan. 7, 2011, accessed June 14, 2021, <https://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=50989493&itype=cmsid>.

111. Mike Lee, as quoted in Nicholas G. Hahn III, “Mike Lee’s Holy Constitution,” *RealClear Religion*, June 15, 2015, accessed June 15, 2021, https://www.realclearreligion.org/articles/2015/06/15/mike_lees_holy_constitution.html.

in connection to their political careers and both have acknowledged Skousen's influence to some extent, Hatch more so than Romney.¹¹² However, it is reasonable to assume they are aware of the NCCS pocket Constitution's association with right-wing extremism and sought to distance themselves from it in order to avoid being painted with an extremist brush similar to how Lee has been presented in the media as described previously. Thus, those who are aware of the NCCS pocket Constitution's associations likely evoke it knowingly, to clearly capture its material presence and its implications: nationalism, libertarian-leaning politics, and radical Christian eschatology.

Conclusion

Arizona House Speaker Russell "Rusty" Bowers made national headlines because of his passionate testimony during the January 6th Committee hearing on Tuesday, June 23, 2022. Bowers refused to bend to pressure from the Trump administration in the wake of the 2020 election to recall the Arizona electors that Joe Biden had won. Many had done this over the course of the hearings, but Bower's justification for refusing to comply was the reason for the increased attention. Bowers explained that "it is a tenet of my faith that the Constitution is divinely inspired," and thus he would not give into demands to take actions that would cast

112. Hatch eulogized Skousen in Washington, D.C., after his 2006 death saying that "shortly before I announced that I would be running for the U.S. Senate in 1976 . . . Cleon was one the first people of political significance and substance who agreed to meet with me and discuss my candidacy." 109 Cong., Rec. S114 (2006) (remarks of Sen. Hatch); Mitt Romney acknowledged having Skousen as a BYU professor in a 2007 radio interview with a conservative radio host Jan Mickelson. See Joanna Brooks, "How Not to Investigate Mitt Romney's Mormon Ties," *Religion Dispatches*, Aug. 8, 2012, accessed May 22, 2023, <https://religiondispatches.org/how-not-to-investigate-mitt-romneys-mormon-ties/>.

doubt on the election's outcome.¹¹³ Bowers, a Latter-day Saint, evoked a distinct religious belief on the national stage that caught the attention of millions of Americans, including Chris Hayes who tweeted that "LDS theology helping to save the American Republic is a great twist!"¹¹⁴

The NCCS pocket Constitution posits the anachronistic juxtaposition of uncontextualized quotations from revered historical figures as evidence of a divine founding and intervention in the creation of the Constitution. The framing of the constitutional text with quotes that contend for a religious founding and advertisements for "expanding our knowledge" through NCCS published materials like *The Making of America* and *The Five Thousand Year Leap* represent an intentional curation on the part of the NCCS. The NCCS continues to put forward its associations with and influences by the likes of Skousen and Benson, which only further shows that this organization subscribes to the sentiments of these prominent ultraconservative voices from the twentieth century.

Most significantly, the pocket Constitution appears to have left its originating context with the NCCS and has found its way into the hands of popular public figures such as the Bundys and Mike Lee, along with millions of other Americans.¹¹⁵ In appearing with these figures, and in such public venues, the NCCS pocket Constitution develops a

113. Ximena Bustillo, "Arizona Lawmaker Rusty Bowers Details the Pressure Put on Him by Trump and Giuliani," *NPR*, June 21, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/06/21/1106413341/arizona-lawmaker-rusty-bowers-pressure-giuliani>.

114. Chris Hayes (@chrishayes), Twitter, June 21, 2022, <https://twitter.com/chrishayes/status/1539302910617591810>.

115. This includes roughly eighty thousand Florida public school students that received NCCS pocket Constitutions. Simon Brown, "Pocketful of Problems: Group Providing Constitutions to Fla. Public School Students Believes Church-State Separation Doesn't Exist," *Americans United for Separation of Church and State*, Dec. 12, 2013, accessed Nov. 10, 2021, <https://www.au.org/blogs/wall-of-separation/pocketful-of-problems-group-providing-constitutions-to-fla-public-school>.

corporeality, a material expression of religion. While journalists have pointed out the pocket Constitution's radical Mormon origins, the presence and performance of the pocket Constitution have not been fully appreciated. Scholars of American religion should not discount these types of sources as kitsch, impartial, and insignificant. This study has demonstrated how unsuspecting pieces of material culture can and do find their way into the hands and minds of Americans and signify broader pervasive attitudes concerning the relationship of the American state and its founding documents to religion, Christian nationalist narratives, libertarian politics and free enterprise and the ability of "things" to package, encapsulate, and embody those ideas. The NCCS pocket Constitution does not simply *express* religion. In a material sense, it *is* religion.

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teaching with fishes

winegar

Sarah Winegar, "Teaching with Fishes,"
32" x 32", woodcut print, 2021

LEADERSHIP, RETENTION, AND US CULTURE IN THE LDS CHURCH IN LATIN AMERICA AND EUROPE

Henri Gooren

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a global church based in the United States. The cultural context of the Church as a top-down, global entity with centralized leadership necessarily interacts with local cultural contexts in complex ways. Many have pointed out ways that US culture serves to attract and retain converts. This article explores one aspect of this cultural exchange in the form of leadership culture. Examples from Europe and Latin America demonstrate that US leadership culture plays a significant role in defining LDS culture in these contexts. New data demonstrates that the local leadership in these regions reflects particular class interests. These aspects of US leadership culture are manifestations of a US colonial legacy. This article further suggests that US leadership culture actually serves as a factor in low retention rates of recent converts.¹

Since the 1960s, Latter-day Saint Church organization is characterized by correlation, standardization, and centralized control. This centralization of leadership means that decisions about content and tone of Church services and culture are often made outside of a local context. Church leaders have acknowledged this tension and attempted

1. An earlier version of half of this article was presented at the annual meeting of the Global Mormon Studies conference in Coventry, England, on Mar. 23, 2022. Thanks to John Hawkins, Ross Martin, Matt Martinic, Taylor Petrey, and especially two or three anonymous peer reviewers for their critical comments that helped to substantially improve this article.

to theorize it in a variety of ways. One way has been to emphasize harmony between Church culture and local culture, especially in European contexts. For instance, in a 1976 General Conference talk, Belgian Elder Charles Didier described the “gospel culture” as a kind of universal that held Latter-day Saints together throughout the world. He defined it as “a vast amalgam of all the positive aspects of our cultures, histories, customs, and languages. The building of the Kingdom of God is such an amalgam, and is the only place where these different values may and can coexist.”²

The concept of a universal gospel culture that transcends any particular culture, and thus may not be reduced to American culture, has become a guiding ideal in LDS discourse. In several talks, Elder Dallin Oaks attempted to define a gospel culture that is independent from any culture in the world, because it derives from God’s plan of salvation and outlines the “values and expectations and practices common to all members of the Church.” Oaks’s General Conference talk “Give Thanks in All Things” described gospel culture as “commandments, covenants, ordinances, and blessings” as expressed, for example, by the principles in the key LDS text “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.”³

Scholars have criticized this idea of a transcendent gospel culture as vacuous. It leaves in place a structure of an American organization that gets to define the parameters of what is most essential to the faith. Gina Colvin has argued, “The way Mormonism is popularly practiced at the metropole and transplanted around the world places the moral/legal (i.e., attention to rules and behavior) above the relational aspects of Christianity (i.e., attention to God’s relationship with us, our relationships with each other, and our relationship with the earth).”⁴ Ryan

2. Charles Didier, “I Have a Question,” *Ensign* 6, no. 6, June 1976, 62.

3. Dallin H. Oaks, “Give Thanks in All Things,” *Ensign* 33, no. 5, May 2003, 95.

4. Gina Colvin, “There’s No Such Thing as a Gospel Culture,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 50, no. 4 (Winter 2017): 59. Colvin wonders why drinking tea should get your temple recommend revoked automatically whereas espousing white supremacist ideas in Sunday School would not.

Cragun concurs that Church leaders are ill-equipped here: “Leaders of the LDS Church describe the Utah-based, white, middle-class American culture they advocate not as monoculturalism but as ‘gospel culture.’”⁵ The Dutch cultural anthropologist Walter van Beek criticized gospel culture as an “ideal culture” that has “no content.” He explains:

Because in the current LDS arrangement, gospel culture, whatever Oaks intends it to mean, will never be allowed to stray too far from the Deseret patterns, and this example is quite different in cultural form. The fact is that no cultural variety in worship is allowed at all. African LDS wards are not allowed to play drums, may not dance and clap, and may not even sing the typical African exchange songs between men and women. The LDS choice for organ and piano has nothing to do with any gospel principle but everything to do with the Puritan heritage of the Restoration.⁶

Van Beek deftly analyzed the relationship between the domestic Church and the international Church as “a clear *hierarchy between colonizer and colonized*,” expressed in “uncritical adoption of the colonizer’s culture, view of the colony as an area to be developed, inequality in financial and personnel exchange, unequal distribution of relevant knowledge etc.”⁷

5. Ryan Cragun, “Summing Up: Problems and Prospects for a Global Church in the Twenty-First Century,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Mormonism*, edited by Gordon Shepherd, Gary Shepherd, and Ryan T. Cragun (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 821.

6. Walter E. A. van Beek, “Church Unity and the Challenge of Cultural Diversity: A View from across the Sahara,” in *Directions for Mormon Studies in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Patrick Q. Mason (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016), 88. In December 2021, the LDS Church updated its *General Handbook* worship guidelines, allowing for the first time more diversity in instrument use, even including drums (see www.thisweekinmormons.com/2021/12/brass-instruments-are-no-longer-forbidden-in-sacrament-meeting/).

7. Walter E. A. van Beek, “Mormon Europeans or European Mormons? An ‘Afro-European’ View on Religious Colonization,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 13. Emphasis mine.

Moreover, administrative centralization has only increased in recent decades, with the hegemonic Salt Lake City headquarters assuming total control of manuals, textbooks, scriptures, translations, and websites worldwide. Van Beek earlier made a bold plea to decentralize the production of Church manuals, which would allow the Church in European countries to produce their own manuals and make them more relevant to their own cultures. He noted that the US manuals did not always work well in European countries: “For Europeans, the Utah church seems overly-focused on sex-related problems, ignoring problems of violence, pollution, and poverty.”⁸

This article explores one aspect of US culture on the global Church in detail and considers its impact in local contexts of Latin America and Europe: the Church’s adoption of US corporate culture, in terms of dress, values, bodily comportment, and class allegiance. The heavy US impact on LDS Church culture and leadership has been both a blessing and a curse. It appealed to many (potential) new members who were attracted to the United States and its culture, for example, in countries like Costa Rica and Guatemala. Brigham Young University (BYU) librarian and historian Mark Grover reported that in earlier years, the LDS Church used its US connection to its advantage in Latin American countries, with the missionaries even offering free English classes.⁹ Yet at the same time, the strong US flavor of the Church contributed to eventually driving many people away—likely including some who were originally attracted to the Church for this reason. The low retention rates of the Church outside the United States are not only due to premature baptizing by missionaries and insufficient preparation of the

8. Walter E. A. van Beek, “Ethnization and Accommodation: Dutch Mormons in Twenty-First Century Europe,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 137.

9. Mark L. Grover, “Mormons in Latin America,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, edited by Terryl L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 523.

new members. I theorize that the strongly US-flavored culture of the Church and its leadership, both locally and globally, is causing many defections from Mormonism and keeping the retention rates in most European and Latin American countries in the 10 to 25 percent range.

Corporate Culture and Local Leadership

There are several reasons why the global Church has adopted US corporate culture. With respect to leadership styles, Belgian American scholar Wilfried Decoo identified four reasons that US leadership styles are so hegemonic: *historical location* (meaning that the early history of the Church took place in the United States in the nineteenth century); *authority* (meaning that the highest leadership is almost exclusively North American); “an American *ideology* of optimism, assertiveness, and personal achievement” (*individualism*); and, possibly most importantly, expected *behavior* based on prior socialization.¹⁰ These all affect how US leadership creates certain outcomes in the global Church.

The influence of US culture on global LDS culture is not one of passive acceptance. Decoo also analyzed four different approaches that LDS Church leaders have taken to the relationship between gospel culture and the surrounding culture of a country outside the United States. The first is *antagonistic*, based on a strong dualism, “with good located in the Mormon community and evil in the outside world.”¹¹ The second is *appreciation* of other cultures and a spirit of conciliation with other religions. The third sees gospel culture “as an *addition* to the good found in the prevailing culture. . . . A parallel mode, which we might call *subtractive*, is to invite people to adopt the gospel in full and then erase from their original backgrounds what is incompatible.

10. Wilfried Decoo, “Expanding Research for the Expanding International Church,” in *Directions for Mormon Studies in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Patrick Q. Mason (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016), 102–106.

11. Decoo, “Expanding Research,” 110.

. . . The approach requires members to actively assess what they must cut from their local cultures.”¹² Decoo identified as the main underlying principle of these approaches the idea that “the gospel shapes a desirable identity.” The gospel does not tell members how to do this, and neither does the Church. However, the Church does offer its own dominant Church culture, which is strongly shaped by US culture.

There are several instances of an antagonistic relationship between LDS US culture and local cultures. For instance, sometimes the LDS Church leadership takes an unequivocal direct stand against certain African cultural practices. One such example of institutional ethnocentrism is *bridewealth* or *lobola*, which Oaks singled out as a “negative cultural tradition” in his address to the African Church leadership in November 2010. Bridewealth involves elaborate gifts in money or cattle from the groom’s family to the bride’s family. Van Beek reported that Oaks objected to it because “it delays marriage for returned missionaries and as such presents a moral hazard. He went on to warn against excessive debts incurred by weddings and funerals. . . . From Elders Oaks’ ecclesiastical standpoint the critique is all-too-easy: all activities that impinge on the present Deseret model of membership are condemned.”¹³ Van Beek countered this by presenting the conventional anthropological analysis of bridewealth as a gift exchange to start and consolidate bonds between in-laws. Oaks condemning this practice is an example of ethnocentrism (although van Beek avoids this term) and hegemony: African cultural practices are reviewed, assessed negatively, and rejected whereas US cultural practices rarely are. Van Beek elaborated his criticism with a strong counterexample:

As a socially approved form of investment, the institution of bride-wealth can be compared to American higher education. Americans spend large sums on college education. Parents go into deep debt for

12. Decoo, “Expanding Research,” 110–111.

13. Van Beek, “Church Unity,” 78.

their children's education, even taking another mortgage on their house, or the students themselves take on expensive loans. . . . These debts can surely be a major burden on individuals and families, but I have yet to hear the first critique of the practice from the LDS Church leadership, let alone under the rubric of "gospel culture." . . . Clearly, the African cultural equation runs differently than the North Atlantic one, which is based upon individualism, achievement, and the separation of the three forms of capital (economic, social, and symbolic).¹⁴

In this case and others, the dominant everyday culture (Decoo prefers the term *socialization*) of the LDS Church is strongly influenced by mainstream (nonreligious) US culture.

These issues are particularly acute with respect to corporate culture. For instance, what is labeled "gospel culture" is often just North American business culture. Decoo explains:

It carries a number of characteristics that seem part of an outward Mormon identity: intense personal contact, greeting each other by the name (often the first name), shaking hands firmly and somewhat longer, with a smile and eye contact; the way to hug another adult; the facial demonstration of assertiveness and commitment; the easiness of social contact between different genders and different ages; a certain looseness in conducting meetings, with moments of humor and a casual speaking style from the pulpit; the use of superlatives, extolling others as "wonderful" and "great," praising each child or youngster as "special." *These behavioral patterns seem trivial to Americans because they have them ingrained.* But in other cultures, some of these patterns stand out as different and often as "American."¹⁵

Decoo gives a striking example here. He had recommended a Congolese brother for a calling in the Belgium mission office, but the "spirit of discernment" of the mission president caused him to reject the candidate. "There is a problem when someone avoids eye contact and gives a weak handshake," the mission president explained. What the

14. Van Beek, "Church Unity," 89.

15. Decoo, "Expanding Research," 104–105. Emphasis mine.

US mission president failed to realize was that in Congo, “as in many cultures around the world, such behavior is a sign of deference and meekness, rather than personal weakness or a lack of social or spiritual capacity.”¹⁶ This is a textbook example of ethnocentrism.

The corporate culture of Church leadership has become closely associated with the faith itself. Decoo recognizes that “many Mormons abroad appreciate this homogeneous and efficient business approach.”¹⁷ In fact, it must be acknowledged that this constitutes one of the Church’s major pull factors in some parts of Europe and Latin America. At the same time, this can also be a source of tension. He explains, “Occasionally we hear members abroad complain that the Church is ‘too American.’ That pertains mostly to a corporate, managerial style of doing things—using quantitative goals, charts, report forms, etc.—which does not square with their understanding of religion as an affective and spiritual realm. Moreover, to strengthen this impression, there is the tendency to call as stake and regional leaders, and hire as Church employees, members who seem most fit, by personality, profession, and dress, to blend in the American corporate style.”¹⁸

This leadership style wields extraordinary influence over the global Church. In his analysis of the Church in Africa, van Beek has previously identified the *corporate culture* that is dominant throughout the Church worldwide as indicative of headquarters hegemony. Examples include frequent separation of the sexes in meetings, a uniform dress code freezing “an outdated clothing fashion that once was in vogue in corporate America,” and publicizing US cultural heroes in Pioneer Celebrations rather than allowing international members to celebrate their own cultural heritage and heroes. He also lists examples such as “job rotation, the insistence on efficient meetings and some interpersonal

16. Decoo, “Expanding Research,” 104.

17. Decoo, “Expanding Research,” 105.

18. Decoo, “Expanding Research,” 105.

formalities vis a vis office holders, the style of reporting on stewardship, and the deference to authority.”¹⁹ These are not neutral, but represent specific cultural values that often conflict in local contents. He notes, for instance, that “job rotation does not at all fit in the cultural definitions of power in Africa,” because “African cultures see power not as an incidental attribute but as a personality characteristic.”²⁰ As a result, former branch presidents, bishops, and stake presidents in African countries frequently become inactive after their fixed-time term ends. The same thing happens in Mexico.²¹ This demonstrates that US cultural practices in the LDS Church can directly contribute to member retention problems elsewhere in the world.

I reviewed a selection of relevant scholarly literature on local Mormon leaders.²² Much literature is historical and focuses on Church presidents and the Quorums of Twelve and Seventy.²³ It turns out that there is a long history of LDS preference for corporate leaders. An early article from 1967 emphasized the need for professional executive abilities in leading a US stake: “Local Church authorities have long recognized the value of using other professionally trained experts such as

19. Van Beek, “Mormon Europeans or European Mormons?,” 22–23.

20. Van Beek, “Church Unity,” 74. Note that this traditional African leadership model is similar to personalism in Latin America.

21. Rex E. Cooper and Moroni Spencer Hernández de Olarte, “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Mexico,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Mormonism*, edited by Gordon Shepherd, Gary Shepherd, and Ryan T. Cragun (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 386.

22. The scarce literature on LDS leadership is acknowledged multiple times by Kevin D. Whitehead in his PhD dissertation, “Historical Analysis of Leadership Theory in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Its Educational System” (Utah State University, 2018), e.g., 22–23, 58, 68.

23. See, for example, David J. Whittaker and Arnold K. Garr, eds., *A Firm Foundation: Church Organization and Administration* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2011). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting many literature references on Mormon leadership.

lawyers, accountants, businessmen, physicians, skilled craftsmen, and musicians where their talents are useful.”²⁴

The corporate culture that LDS leaders adopted reflected specifically American values. For instance, in European contexts, there were actually tensions between French business culture and Church culture. C. Brooklynn Derr, a BYU professor of management, studied LDS and non-LDS business executives in France in 1985, noting that local Church leaders operated in a complicated forcefield of three competing cultures: French national culture, French LDS culture, and (US) LDS culture. The hierarchical power pyramid in the LDS Church was similar to the French business firm, but many of the latter’s socializing rituals (for example, the long business lunch) were undermined by the Word of Wisdom prohibiting wine and coffee for members. Derr concluded that “the constraints of both cultures (French and Latter-day Saint) might cause French Mormons to adopt a more extreme, less flexible lifestyle.”²⁵

US cultural preferences also manifested in Latin American missionary efforts in these decades. Working as a missionary in Bolivia in 1974–1976, David Knowlton was “actively encouraged to convert ‘leaders,’ . . . [for example,] we focused on middle-class and upper-middle-class men: their education and cultural traditions fit them easily into the Mormon concept of leader and gave them the leadership qualities necessary in the Church’s bureaucratic system.” This preference also marked certain people as undesirable: “Missionaries were also strongly discouraged from working with Quechua-speaking villagers,

24. Kendall O. Price and Kent Lloyd, “New Approaches to Church Executive Leadership: Behavioral Science Perspectives,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 2, no. 4 (1967): 49. Note that the skilled craftsmen they identified in 1967 were mostly gone among stake presidents more recently, and musicians are completely absent.

25. C. Brooklynn Derr, “Messages from Two Cultures: Mormon Leaders in France, 1985,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 21, no. 2 (1988): 109.

who constituted 35% of the nation's population, unless they came to the city."²⁶

As Church leaders sought locals who belonged to their class to join the Church, they cultivated them to take on local leadership. Knowlton observed that "Mormonism requires a commitment of a significant portion of one's time to Church service and a sufficient education in the culture of management to be able to perform according to Church practices. Thus we should not be surprised that Church leadership tends to be drawn from relatively narrow social circles. . . . Virtually none of the leaders come from the laboring classes that make up the majority of Latin America's workforce. Even in those stakes in heavily working-class areas, there appears to be a preference for leaders from the management sectors."²⁷

These leadership preferences are often conflated with divine authorization and authority. This creates certain risks. Knowlton argues that Mormonism has "sanctified" the leadership structure itself, since "Mormon central leadership sees itself as sanctioned by its proximity to God and as authorized to act in His name." However, "as in the case of all power or authority, its functioning depends socially on the acceptance of its legitimacy by local members of the Church."²⁸

Others have pointed out how a corporate managerial class of leaders creates tensions and divisions in Latin American churches. In 1995, sociologist Marcus Martins conducted a survey of 190 and in-depth interviews with 17 former Church leaders (mostly bishops, stake

26. David Knowlton, "Thoughts on Mormonism in Latin America," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 25, no. 2 (1992): 49–50.

27. David Knowlton, "Mormonism in Latin America: Towards the Twenty-first Century," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29, no. 1 (1996): 172.

28. David Knowlton, "Hands Raised Up: Corruption, Power, and Context in Bolivian Mormonism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 40, no. 4 (2007): 62.

presidents, and area representatives) in Brazil. His informants stressed the importance of interpersonal skills for local LDS leaders: especially humility (44 percent), love (41 percent), and patience (20 percent).²⁹ Main leadership flaws they identified were pride (36 percent), lack of delegation (18 percent), impatience (11 percent), not listening (11 percent), arrogance (11 percent), and authoritarianism (8 percent).³⁰ Class was another factor. Most older members in Brazil were middle class, whereas the newer members tended to be low-educated and poor. Martins personally observed how this could lead to a “split congregation.” The wealthier members occupied the first two rows and all leadership positions, whereas poorer-dressed members sat at the back, some “facing the floor, as if ashamed. After the meeting some of the old-timers expressed their desire for the division of the ward and the creation of a branch for ‘those people.’”³¹ Martins warned: “*In order to avoid the disintegration of local LDS communities the LDS Church must be on the watch against the formation of a ‘managerial-ecclesiastical elite’ detached from the people and unconcerned with their needs.*”³²

Other studies of non-LDS leaders confirm that local Church leadership in Latin America is perceived as a barrier for many newer converts. A 2017 article on the Catholic diocese of Ambato, Ecuador, analyzed the impact of the religious leader’s behavior on his

29. Marcus H. Martins, “The Oak Tree Revisited: Brazilian LDS Leaders’ Insights on the Growth of the Church in Brazil” (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 1996), 99–100, 167–168.

30. Martins, “The Oak Tree Revisited,” 101–102.

31. Martins, “The Oak Tree Revisited,” 158–159.

32. Martins, “The Oak Tree Revisited,” 159. Emphasis mine.

congregation.³³ The study concluded that parishioners turned off, dropped out, or became apathetic when their leaders were too materialist, indifferent, close-minded, overly involved in (new) media technologies, bogged down in scandals, making arbitrary decisions, abusing their authority, lacking in dynamism, and making exaggerated demands on their congregants. Believers stressed the importance of the following qualities in their religious leaders: service leadership, theological knowledge, spiritual guideship, and being open to dialogue (i.e., confident, enthusiastic, respectful, communicative, humble, generous, with a strong testimony).³⁴

The 2018 dissertation of education scholar Kevin D. Whitehead from Utah State University offers a historical analysis of leadership theories in the LDS Church, based on official Church texts, speeches, and handbooks.³⁵ LDS leadership theory showed remarkable consistency from 1900 to 2017 in the desired qualities of leaders: love, persuasiveness, honesty, humility, confidence, righteousness, commitment, and compassion.³⁶ The enduring LDS leadership themes were likewise consistent over a century: an emphasis on developing leaders among all members as accountable agents who organize and lead like Christ and counsel together in participatory councils on the basis of vision, purpose, personal revelation, and inspiration from the Holy Ghost, with the ultimate goals of strengthening families and bringing people

33. Patricio Valverde Gavilanes, Enma Leiva Sánchez, Blanca Oñate Sánchez, and René Ayala Guamangate, “Comportamiento del líder religioso y su influencia en la actuación de los feligreses” [Conduct of the religious leader and its influence on the behavior of the congregation], in I Congreso de Ciencia, Sociedad e Investigación Universitaria, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador Ambato, 2017, accessed July 1, 2022, available at repositorio.puce.edu.ec/bitstream/123456789/2096/2/Comportamiento%20del%20L%C3%ADDER%20Religioso.pdf.

34. Valverde Gavilanes et al., “Comportamiento del líder religioso,” 7–8.

35. Kevin D. Whitehead, “Historical Analysis of Leadership Theory.”

36. Whitehead, “Historical Analysis of Leadership Theory,” 214–215.

to salvation.³⁷ Leaders should be self-motivated problem-solvers and willing to be lifelong learners who can learn from their past mistakes. LDS Church President Monson explicitly warned them: “Never let a problem to be solved become more important than a person to be loved.”³⁸ Whitehead’s systematic content allows him to trace changes and historical patterns, such as the evolution from more hierarchical LDS Church committees in the first half of the twentieth century to the more participatory councils from the 1970s to 2017.³⁹

The local LDS Church leadership impacted the Church’s dominant culture in at least two direct ways. First, the leadership (both local and global) organized and controlled the organigram: the hierarchical administrative connections between the different levels that ensured the smooth functioning of the Church operation. Second, the local leadership defined the operational parameters of Church culture through its daily interactions between leaders on the one hand and between leaders and members on the other. Both content and tone in the local leadership of the Mormon Church were heavily impacted by a dominant US corporate culture. This was particularly true of the US managerial-style culture that has dominated the Church leadership culture in local units across the world since at least the correlation changes of the 1960s.

Background and Performance of Mormon Leaders in Latin America and Europe

Given the importance of local leaders in (1) mediating between US Church leadership and local membership and (2) playing a role in defining Church culture for new converts, further empirical analysis of their status and their practices seems warranted. This article contributes

37. Whitehead, “Historical Analysis of Leadership Theory,” 211–213.

38. Whitehead, “Historical Analysis of Leadership Theory,” 222. The quote is from President Thomas Monson, “Love at Home,” *Ensign*, Aug. 2011, 4.

39. Whitehead, “Historical Analysis of Leadership Theory,” 240.

further information about local leaders in Europe and Latin America based on new data.

Previously, only one survey on the socioeconomic backgrounds of local LDS leaders in South America had been performed. Knowlton provided a fascinating overview of the occupations of stake presidents and their counselors in 1986 and in 1993–1994.⁴⁰ A relatively high number (13 percent) were Church employees in both city and country, but most by far were business professionals: 36 percent of the sample across Chile and 33 percent in Santiago alone. In Latin America as a whole, however, business professionals made up 50 percent, so Chile scored significantly lower. Merchants made up 11 percent in Chile and 20 percent in Santiago, whereas technicians were 10 percent in Chile and 9 percent in Santiago.

The demographics of LDS leaders in Chile in these years were significantly different from the general membership. Forty-five percent of Chilean LDS members in 1986 were workers or unemployed, 26 percent were lower-middle class, and only 15 percent were professionals.⁴¹ In the 1982 census, LDS members in Santiago were overwhelmingly located in the poorer neighborhoods (*comunas*) in the north (32 percent of all chapel buildings) and south (another 32 percent), with only 20 percent in the west and 21 percent in the center and east.⁴² Knowlton concluded that the Church “celebrates business and bourgeois values and society,” summarizing that “the [LDS] Church in [poor] neighborhoods is much more successful at attracting the minority of residents who claim white-collar status, and these are more likely to be represented among the Church’s leadership than are blue-collar workers,

40. David C. Knowlton, “Mormonism in Chile,” in *Mormon Identities in Transition*, edited by Douglas Davies (London: Cassell, 1996), 73.

41. Knowlton, “Mormonism in Chile,” 71.

42. Knowlton, “Mormonism in Chile,” 72.

even though they are the largest single sector of the adult male membership and even more the largest sector of the neighborhoods.”⁴³

The present article contributes to this information by providing an updated survey of LDS leadership demographics. Knowlton’s study of South America, especially Chilean leaders and members, is more than three decades old and only covered one year. I conducted an update of Knowlton’s study of the occupations of stake presidents and their counselors in Chile, employing the same general categories. Using the online version of the *LDS Church News* for 2000–2019,⁴⁴ I collected data for Chile (table 1) and all countries in Central America (table 2). I also compared this research to data on European Church leaders. For Europe, I collected data from 2000–2019 on the occupations of stake presidents and their counselors in Belgium and the Netherlands (table 3), referenced by Decoo and van Beek. A comparison faces some limitations. Total case numbers are low for Belgium and the Netherlands ($N = 21$ for the Netherlands; $N = 15$ for Belgium), although the total for Central America is strong ($N = 227$) and for Chile respectable ($N = 43$). Even allowing for sample size differences, some continuities and similarities in the distributions of occupations are surprising, especially in the case of Chile.

The new data for Chile, Central America, and Europe show that the local LDS leaders display a great deal of homogeneity and preference for corporate leadership. Chile continues to have a relatively high number of stake presidents and counselors who are Church employees: 16 percent—against 8 percent in Central America and 13 percent in Belgium (0 in the Netherlands). Professionals in Chile are now much lower than the 36 percent in 1993–1994: 16 percent—against only 6 percent in Central America. By comparison, there are 0 in Belgium, and 14 percent in the Netherlands. By far the biggest groups in *all* countries

43. Knowlton, “Mormonism in Chile,” 74.

44. See <https://www.thechurchnews.com/>. Accessed on June 11, 2021.

Table 1: Occupations of stake presidencies in Chile, 2000-2019

	N	%
Business employees	8	19%
Church employee	7	16%
Professionals	7	16%
Small business owners	6	14%
Business administration	5	12%
Technicians	4	9%
Educators	3	7%
Government employees	1	2%
Unskilled labor	1	2%
Professional military	1	2%
Merchants	0	0
Farmers	0	0
Others	0	0
Totals	43	100%

Source: *Church News*, various editions, 2000-2019, accessed March 10 and 11, 2020, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/>.

are now business administrators (12 percent Chile, 17.5 percent Central America, 19 percent Netherlands, and 27 percent Belgium) and business employees (19 percent Chile, 17 percent Central America, 38 percent Netherlands and 20 percent Belgium). These high percentages reflect the continued importance of the corporate world for local LDS lay leadership.

Other careers with administrative skill sets are also highly represented. The self-employed category of small business owners is very similar in Chile, Belgium, and the Netherlands (14, 13 and 10 percent respectively) but significantly higher in Central America at 23 percent (reflected in my research on the LDS Church in Costa Rica and Guatemala). The only other important category is technicians, ranging from 9 to 12 percent in Chile and Central America and 5 to 7 percent in the Netherlands and Belgium. Surprisingly, merchants have entirely

Table 2: Occupations of stake presidencies in Central America, 2000–2019

	N	%
Small business owners	52	23%
Business administration	40	17.5%
Business employees	39	17%
Technicians	27	12%
Church employee	18	8%
Educators	18	8%
Professionals	13	6%
Unskilled labor	9	4%
Government employees	6	2.5%
Merchants	3	1.5%
Professional military	1	0.5%
Others	1	0.5%
Farmers	0	0
Totals	227	100%

Source: *Church News*, various editions, 2000-2019, accessed March 10 and 11, 2020, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/>.

disappeared in the stake presidencies of Chile, even though they were 11 percent in 1993–1994. Educators are a modest group everywhere: 7 percent in Chile, 8 percent in Central America, 7 percent in Belgium, and 5 percent in the Netherlands. Government employees are the smallest group, ranging from 2 percent in Chile, 2.5 percent in Central America, 5 percent in the Netherlands, and 7 percent in Belgium. The military make up 1 case each in Chile and Central America and 0 in Belgium and the Netherlands. Farmers are absent everywhere, except for 1 case in the Netherlands (5 percent). Unskilled labor is totally absent in Belgium and the Netherlands, present in 1 case in Chile (2 percent), but makes up 9 cases (4 percent) in Central America.

Part of the reason there is an overrepresentation of these classes of men in leadership roles is because of the unpaid nature of Church

Table 3: Occupations of stake presidencies in the Netherlands and Belgium, 2000–2019

	Netherlands <i>N</i> (%)	Belgium <i>N</i> (%)	Totals
Business employees	8 (38%)	3 (20%)	11 (31%)
Business administration	4 (19%)	4 (27%)	8 (22%)
Small business owners	2 (10%)	2 (13%)	4 (11%)
Professionals	3 (14%)	0 (0)	3 (8%)
Church employee	0 (0)	2 (13%)	2 (6%)
Government employees	1 (5%)	1 (7%)	2 (6%)
Educators	1 (5%)	1 (7%)	2 (6%)
Technicians	1 (5%)	1 (7%)	2 (6%)
Merchants	0 (0)	1 (7%)	1 (3%)
Farmers	1 (5%)	0 (0)	1 (3%)
Professional military	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Unskilled labor	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Others	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Totals	21 (100%)	15 (100%)	36 (100%)

Source: *Church News*, various editions, 2000-2019, accessed March 10 and 11, 2020, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/>.

service. In my previous fieldwork, I noted these problems in Guatemala and Nicaragua: “Rotating, unpaid leadership positions did not function well in a situation of poverty and little formal education. Bishops and stake presidents were unable to imitate the US managerial leadership model. Many bishops wanted to control everything themselves because they felt they could not rely on (passive) ward members. The *caudillo* (charismatic warlord) then became the leadership model instead of the corporate manager. This, in turn, made the rank-and-file members even more passive.”⁴⁵ Rather than efficiency, the cultural management

45. Henri Gooren, “Analyzing LDS Growth in Guatemala: Report from a Barrio,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 114.

styles here tended to reward authoritarian leadership that alienated others. It made leaders more likely to (ab)use their power to pressure other members, who often felt insulted and became inactive.

US LDS leadership models often conflicted with Latin American leadership models. Researchers Cooper and Hernández de Olarte have explored how LDS bureaucratic and hierarchical structure functions in these contexts. In Mexico, and in most of Latin America, they note that the traditional style of leadership, *personalism*, “is based on either on a bond of friendship or on the leader’s ability to bestow favors on the follower. The leader consequently has difficulty maintaining control over followers with whom he cannot maintain personal ties. In contrast to traditional Mexican personalism, the LDS Church official leadership style is more impersonal and bureaucratic, such as that which is typically found in a US corporation.”⁴⁶ Few local leaders in Mexico were able to emulate the US corporate leadership model.

The result of gathering fresh data on the backgrounds of LDS leaders in Central America, Chile, Belgium, and the Netherlands is that it demonstrates the *continuity* of the LDS Church’s standards for leadership recruitment. Stake presidents and their counselors are still overwhelmingly recruited from a background as (small) business owners, business administrators, business employees, and professionals. These categories combined made up 81 percent in Chile 1993–1994, compared to 61 percent in Chile, 64 percent in Central America, 60 percent in Belgium, and 81 percent in the Netherlands in 2000–2019. Church employees, the other main group, made up 13 percent in Chile 1993–1994 against 16 percent in Chile, 8 percent in Central America, and 13 percent in Belgium in 2000–2019; surprisingly, Church employees made up 0 in the Netherlands in 2000–2019.

46. Cooper and Hernández de Olarte, “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Mexico,” 385.

Leadership, Growth, and Retention: The Country Church Growth Assessment Protocol

This article is interested in assessing the effect of US corporate culture in local LDS Church leadership in Latin America and Europe on Church growth and retention. I analyze LDS Church growth using a model I developed earlier. The country church growth assessment protocol analyzes church growth at country level as the result of four religious and four nonreligious factors, which can be both internal and external to the church under study (see figure 1). The internal religious factors are (1a) appeal of the doctrine and (1b) evangelization activities; the internal nonreligious factors are (1c) appeal of the church organization and (1d) natural growth and membership retention. The external religious factors are (2a) dissatisfaction with Catholicism and (2b) responses from the Catholic hierarchy to non-Catholic growth; the external nonreligious factors are (2c) appeal of competing secular organizations and (2d) social, economic, and/or psychological *anomie* as well as the urbanization process, which uproots people and presumably makes them more likely to join a new church.⁴⁷

Local Mormon leaders have an impact on all four internal factors, although their influence on the appeal of the Church's doctrine (1a) is obviously limited. Yet local leaders play a key role in the size and strength of evangelization and missionary activities (1b), the appeal of the organization to outsiders (1c), and, as previously mentioned, especially in natural growth and retention (1d). When members first start having doubts about key LDS doctrines, the reaction of leaders is key. If members lack a relationship of confidence with leaders, they will

47. Emilio Willems, *Followers of the New Faith: Culture Change and the Rise of Protestantism in Brazil and Chile* (Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 1967); Bryan R. Roberts, "Protestant Groups and Coping with Urban Life in Guatemala," *American Journal of Sociology* 73, no. 6 (1968): 753-767; Christian Lalive d'Epinay, *Haven of the Masses: A Study of the Pentecostal Movement in Chile* (London: Lutterworth, 1969).

Figure 1: The new country church growth protocolⁱ

	(1) Internal factors	(2) External factors
Religious factors	1a Appeal of doctrine, rituals, code of conduct, morality, theology, mystical experiences, healing, tithing, liturgy	2a Dissatisfaction with doctrine, rituals, etc. of parental religion and other competing churches
	1b Evangelization events, activities, missionaries, public prayer/preaching	2b Evangelization events, activities, etc. of competing churches/leaders
Nonreligious factors	1c Appeal of the organization, skills, training, education, leaders, networks	2c Appeal of competing secular organizations, clubs, parties, etc.
	1d Natural growth, membership socialization and retention, membership demographics and generational effects	2d Urbanization process; social, economic, and/or psychological <i>anomie</i> (poverty, war, crime, etc.)

ⁱ Adapted, with extensive changes, from Henri Gooren, “Reconsidering Protestant Growth in Guatemala,” in *Holy Saints and Fiery Preachers: The Anthropology of Protestantism in Mexico and Central America*, edited by James W. Dow and Alan R. Sandstrom (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2001), 177. The contents of the eight cells have all been expanded, and I develop a method to compare competing sources on church membership statistics.

likely not share their doubts and likely become less active. Some LDS programs target less-active members, but they require missionaries and local members to visit them and inquire about their motivations. Without a relationship of confidence, the true motivations for doubt and eventual disaffiliation will likely not be shared.

In Latin America, the typical new LDS member is a young woman—or a young family with small children—in her/their (early) twenties of (lower-) middle-class origin, living in the capital or another (main) city. Most wards have a majority of women who are active in church, but there is a limited number of male priesthood holders and leaders,

leading in part to the serious problem of failing leadership mentioned earlier.⁴⁸

It is important to understand why people join the Church to begin with. Bryant et al. summarized the multiple attractions of the Mormon Church to people in Latin America as follows:

Many people are attracted to Mormonism because of its organization radiating middle-class values, its strict code of conduct, its practical teachings (e.g., on raising children and household budgeting), its unique doctrine and spirituality, its style of worship and hymns, and its lay priesthood for men. Most people are recruited through their own social networks (LDS friends and relatives) or the missionaries. When specifically asked about main attraction factors, Guatemalan Mormons mentioned the strict code of conduct, learning new things in Church, feeling the joy of God's love, being blessed with miracles, and receiving support from fellow members.⁴⁹

This study suggests that the corporate culture values attracted members to join. But more analysis is needed here.

It is possible that certain pull factors gradually evolve into push factors. For instance, the LDS lifestyle (especially the Word of Wisdom prohibiting coffee, tobacco, and alcohol) is hard to maintain if one's family and friends—plus colleagues at work—all partake in these

48. Gooren, "Analyzing LDS Growth in Guatemala"; Henri Gooren, "The Dynamics of LDS Growth in Guatemala, 1948–1998," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 34, no. 3 and 4 (Fall-Winter 2001): 55–75; Henri Gooren, "Latter-day Saints under Siege: The Unique Experience of Nicaraguan Mormons," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 40, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 134–155.

49. Seth Bryant, Henri Gooren, Rick Phillips, and David Stewart Jr., "Conversion and Retention in Mormonism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, edited by Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 769–770, based on multiple sources but especially Henri Gooren, *Rich among the Poor: Church, Firm, and Household among Small-Scale Entrepreneurs in Guatemala City* (Amsterdam: Thela, 1999), 2, 153, 155–156, 160–162, 166–169, 186.

substances. The lay priesthood for men and the many Church callings require much time, which is especially difficult for families with (young) children struggling to make ends meet. New members may also struggle to feel God's love and the blessing of miracles if they *don't* feel supported by their fellow members and leaders.

It may be possible to draw some correlations between growth rates in these regions and their relationship to local leadership styles. The main growth periods in Belgium and the Netherlands were 1960–1965 and in 1960–1980 respectively.⁵⁰ I also did extensive research on average annual Mormon growth rates in several Latin American countries concerning their main growth years.⁵¹ The most explosive growth in Central America occurred in the 1980s (Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Honduras) and 1990s (Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua). In Nicaragua, a delayed growth explosion occurred in the 1990s and early 2000s because of Sandinista repression and harassment of Mormons between 1979 and 1990.

Most countries in Central America continued to have average annual growth rates of 10 to more than 20 percent in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet Mormon membership growth clearly started going down after 2000–2005. The average annual growth rate has been only 2 percent or lower for Belgium and the Netherlands since 1997, for Chile since 2000, for El Salvador since 2002 (although it was slightly up in 2007–2014), for Costa Rica also since 2002 (slightly up in 2010–2016),

50. See the cumorah.com country resources statistical profiles of Belgium and the Netherlands.

51. Gooren, "Analyzing LDS Growth in Guatemala"; Gooren, "The Dynamics of LDS Growth in Guatemala"; Gooren, "Latter-day Saints under Siege"; Henri Gooren, "Comparing Mormon and Adventist Growth Patterns in Latin America: The Chilean Case," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 46, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 45–77.

for Guatemala since 2003 (slightly up in 2008–2014), for Panama since 2003, for Honduras since 2016, and for Nicaragua since only 2018.⁵²

LDS membership growth in the 1960s (Belgium, Netherlands, and Chile) and 1970s and 1980s (Central America) was correlated with a huge increase in Church resources (money, staff, missionaries, etc.) poured into the various regions. Clearly, at this time, the focus was on baptizing investigators as quickly as possible, without worrying whether or not they were sufficiently prepared to remain active in the Church. Demographic changes in these boom regions aided LDS growth, especially the baby boom population explosions following World War II in the United States and Europe and similar birth explosions across Latin America between the 1960s and 1990s. Anomie also played a role in stimulating LDS growth, especially in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s (political turmoil) and in the 1980s (political turmoil on top of a huge economic crisis). The combined effects of vastly increased LDS resources, anomie, and demographics produced the LDS membership explosions in these different regions in the 1960s–1980s. Yet these growth explosions could not be handled effectively by an underperforming local leadership—either in Latin America or in Belgium and the Netherlands. One main result of this was the very low retention rate of new members, hovering between 10 and 30 percent.

The low retention rates in these decades reflect the difference between all members on record (i.e., people who were born as Mormons and accepted the Church as children and people who converted to the Church at a later age) and the people who currently self-identify as Mormons. A 50 percent or lower member retention rate for the first year of new members was observed across Latin America from the late 1960s onward. Mark Grover, for example, reported that between 1968 and 1973, only 15 to 20 percent of newly baptized members in Brazil remained active, 30 to 35 percent became inactive Mormons, and half

52. The most convenient and up-to-date source of Mormon membership development is cumorah.com.

dropped out entirely and no longer considered themselves Mormons at all.⁵³ Retention rates in Costa Rica were 50 to 68 percent in 1990,⁵⁴ in Guatemala City 25 percent in 1995,⁵⁵ and in Managua, Nicaragua, 23 percent in 2005.⁵⁶

Already in these early decades, Church leaders were concerned about low retention rates. My 1991 master's research in Costa Rica explicitly addressed the problem of inactivity, noting campaigns in the Church to prevent the root causes of inactivity and to win back inactive members, for example through home visits. The Costa Rican mission president saw "a lack of integration on the group" as the root cause of inactivity: new members felt excluded because the veteran members seemed distant, uninterested, and not very helpful. However, investigators also underestimate the huge responsibilities that come from baptism. New members have a weak testimony and insufficient knowledge of key LDS doctrines. But the mission president also perceived "a lack of responsibility among Latins," who often struggle to fulfil the promises they make. Finally, certain personal crises may cause (temporary) inactivity: losing a job, family problems, and conflicts with local members and leaders.⁵⁷ My PhD research in Guatemala City likewise

53. Mark L. Grover, "Mormonism in Brazil: Religion and Dependency in Latin America" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1985), 37–39.

54. Henri Gooren, "De expanderende mormoonse kerk in Latijns Amerika: Schetsen van een wijk in San José, Costa Rica" [The Expanding Mormon Church in Latin America: Sketches from a Ward in San José, Costa Rica] (master's thesis, Utrecht University, 1991), 16. Membership data for First Ward (Barrio Uno [First Ward], Los Yoses, San José). In May 1990, the LDS Area Office in Guatemala City reported 330 members, but the bishopric listed 250. On Sunday, around 170 showed up.

55. Gooren, *Rich among the Poor*, 77.

56. Gooren, "Latter-day Saints under Siege," 137, reported 46 percent retention, but only *half* of this number showed up in church every Sunday.

57. Gooren, "De expanderende mormoonse kerk," 34.

identified problems with other members and leaders as a main cause of inactivity and low retention of new converts.⁵⁸

LDS retention rates in Central America have continued to be low or have even *decreased* since the 1990s. For 2017, the *Encyclopedia of Latin American Religions* gave Mormon retention rates of 15 to 20 percent for Mexico, 20 to 25 percent for Guatemala, 15 percent for El Salvador, 15 to 20 percent for Honduras, 10 to 15 percent for Nicaragua, 20 percent for Costa Rica, and 20 percent for Panama.⁵⁹ These extremely low Mormon retention rates in Central America suggest that many of the problems I identified in my earlier research in the region continue to the present day, constraining Mormon growth.

The situation in Central America is somewhat different from North America. Pew reported that 30 percent of US Mormons eventually leave the Church.⁶⁰ The literature identified main causes of inactivity and disaffiliation among the LDS in the United States. The root causes were family and work crises, burnout related to callings, and controversial feelings about LDS history (polygamy, Joseph Smith) and key LDS doctrines, for example regarding the primacy of marriage, traditional gender roles, homosexuality, the emphasis on obedience, and the lack of open intellectual debate. Many people who eventually disaffiliated described a long process of increasing doubts about doctrines as well as a keen awareness of “the high relational costs of exit.”⁶¹ Dropouts reported feeling “ostracized, lonely, lost, confused, and

58. Gooren, *Rich among the Poor*, 183–185.

59. Henri Gooren, ed., *Encyclopedia of Latin American Religions* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019), 1005, 1011, 1015, 1022, 1027, 1029, 1032. The retention rate is defined as the percentage of baptized members on official Church record that actually show up in church on a regular basis.

60. Pew Research Center, *Religious Landscape Study: USA* (Washington, D.C.: Pew, 2014).

61. Amorette Hinderaker and Amy O'Connor, “The Long Road Out: Exit Stories from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” *Communication Studies* 66, no. 5 (Nov.-Dec. 2015): 525.

sometimes guilty. Many reported the loss of important relationships or talked about a sense of strain in their relationships to parents, siblings, extended family members, or friends.”⁶² This is especially true if the dropouts were LDS by parental religion and if they lived in areas where the LDS Church formed a significant or even majority religion, such as Utah and the US Mountain West. Across Latin America, however, the LDS Church forms a minority religion, although there are now second and even third generation LDS, especially in Mexico, Brazil, and Chile (less so in Central America).

The situation in Europe also shows that problems with members and leaders, burnout, problems with key LDS doctrines, and premature baptizing by missionaries likewise contributed to low retention rates. Class has been a historical issue also, as well as conflict with the country’s culture. Decoo reported that retention in his Antwerp ward in 1969 was a mere 10 percent. Most inactive Belgian members were widowed or divorced, came from lower-socioeconomic classes, and lived in poor inner-city areas that Decoo had never entered before. He vividly described “agonizing stories of hostility in families, isolation from the cultural environment, persecution from outside the church and disillusionment within.”⁶³

The problems for retention in Belgium have shifted in more recent decades. Since the 1990s, most new LDS members in Belgium have been “legal and illegal aliens from Africa and Eastern Europe” with “marital, legal, financial and emotional problems” that put a huge burden on local leaders who were expected to help or counsel, but who were “themselves often weak and inexperienced,” thus often leading

62. Ines W. Jindra, “Deconversion from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Quest for Identity,” *Pastoral Psychology* 71, no. 3 (June 2022): 331.

63. Wilfried Decoo, “Feeding the Fleeting Flock: Reflections on the Struggle to Retain Church Members in Europe,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 97.

to burnout.⁶⁴ That is, the many problems resulting from low retention rates took an additional toll on the local leaders, especially bishops and stake presidents, which in turn increased the possibility of these leaders performing badly or even becoming inactive themselves.

The Netherlands shows similar trends. Walter van Beek reported a 28 percent retention for an average ward in the Netherlands in 2009.⁶⁵ He went on to analyze the typical disaffiliation patterns of the LDS members in depth: 20 to 30 percent were baptized as a child without any commitment to the Church, 5 to 10 percent received performative baptisms without any commitment, 16.5 percent were baptized because of strong rapport with a missionary only to drop out soon afterward, 20 to 30 percent were committed members for a time but dropped out after significant life changes (divorce, drug use, homosexuality), and the another one-sixth suffered from disenchantment (often following quarrels and doctrinal problems), were “overexposed” as children of leaders, or suffered from burnout as leaders themselves.

Van Beek also emphasized the main difference between the United States and the Netherlands: many inactive members in the US eventually returned to the Church, but in Europe they never did.⁶⁶ Van Beek concluded that LDS teachings support a discourse stressing a clear-cut commitment: one is either in or out.⁶⁷ Main factors contributing to disaffiliation among Dutch members were the absence of official LDS discourses on marginal members (for example, divorcees, gays, and lesbians), the lingering tendency to employ an obsolete “tribal discourse” on the blood of Israel, and the dominant LDS discourse of a righteous religious minority waging battle against a large majority.

64. Decoo, “Feeding the Fleeting Flock,” 101.

65. Walter E. A. van Beek, “Mormonism, A Global Counter-Church?” *By Common Consent*, June 18, 2009, accessed Nov. 12, 2020, bycommonconsent.com/2009/06/18/mormonism-a-global-counter-church-I, 4.

66. Van Beek, “Mormonism, A Global Counter-Church?,” 7.

67. Van Beek, “Mormonism, A Global Counter-Church?v” 9–10.

These LDS teachings were connected to the history of the Mormon Church in the United States and to mainstream US culture, where they resonated strongly and provided motivation to endure under difficult circumstances. However, these dominant US Mormon discourses were far removed from mainstream cultural beliefs in Western Europe and Latin America, contributing to the lower retention rates.

In addition to these reasons for inactivity and disaffiliation, this article suggests that the leadership style of local LDS Church leaders may also be a contributing factor. The question first raised over thirty years ago by BYU sociologists Howard M. Bahr and Stan L. Albrecht is still relevant: “To what extent does the lay ministry of the Mormons contribute to the perception of local leadership as inept at dealing with intellectual challenges and unusual personal problems?”⁶⁸ For more than three decades, the LDS Church recruited people from similar socioeconomic backgrounds for its main leadership positions at the ward and stake level in Chile, Central America, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Ethnographic research has showed that unpaid leadership positions did not function well in the situations of poverty and little formal education that characterize Latin America and Africa. Moreover, local cultures in both Latin America and Africa conceptualized leadership as a personal quality, undercutting the idea of rotating leadership positions. Local leaders in Central America were overwhelmed, authoritarian, and unable to emulate the US managerial model preferred by the Church. They often lacked the idealized qualities of LDS leaders: love, humility, confidence, and compassion.⁶⁹ They often acted too authoritarian and alienated members, especially the new ones, contributing to the low retention.

Of course, many additional factors other than leadership contributed to the low retention rates in Europe and Latin America: quick

68. Howard M. Bahr and Stan L. Albrecht, “Strangers Once More: Patterns of Disaffiliation from Mormonism,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 28, no. 2 (June 1989): 199.

69. Whitehead, *Historical Analysis of Leadership Theory*, 214–215.

baptisms leading to a lack of intellectual and spiritual preparation among new members, the extended amounts of time and money the Church demands from its members, conflicts between new members and older members (and leaders), a lack of confidence between leaders and members, and the high social costs of breaking other cultural expectations.⁷⁰

In all fairness, the LDS Church has worked in the past decades to address the problems of local leadership and the dominance of US culture. As Grover has pointed out:

With the efforts to make the church less conspicuously American there was a parallel effort by the church to delegate more control over the expansion to local leadership. The establishment of the Area Presidency system in 1984 was equally a push to decentralize decision making and to establish controls to prevent deviation from church-wide policies. Those in the Area Presidencies were either Americans or Latin Americans who had been trained within the administrative system of the church. The result is that Mormon worship and practice in Latin America is similar to that found in the United States and significantly different and distinctive from traditional Latin American religious worship.⁷¹

It is too early to tell if these efforts were successful and to what extent. But they certainly increased the importance of local leadership and raised the visibility of non-US leaders.

Conclusion

The top-down, hierarchical, centralized leadership model concentrated all power and control of resources in Salt Lake City and in the highest LDS leadership functions that were controlled almost exclusively by North Americans. Van Beek aptly described this as a colonizer-colonized

70. Gooren, "Analyzing LDS Growth in Guatemala"; Gooren, "The Dynamics of LDS Growth in Guatemala"; Gooren, "Latter-day Saints under Siege."

71. Grover, "Mormons in Latin America," 524.

model. These North Americans imposed their own cultural standards on socialization, body language, cultural codes, and the limitation of approved expressions of LDS worship in style, music, and ritual all over the world. US leaders also imposed their own views and their ethnocentrism to shape members and leaders in other countries to adhere to US standards. Combined with the perception of the LDS Church as “American” and the declining standing of America in the world since the 1990s, this also contributed significantly to lower activity rates. Cooper and Hernández de Olarte explicitly recommended that “foreign administrators must be sensitive to the feelings and aspirations of the people among whom they are working.”⁷²

What about the prospects for future LDS membership growth? Demographics form the basis of Mormon membership growth worldwide, especially the high number of people under twenty-five in many (developing) countries that constitute the main recruitment reservoir of the Church. It is likewise true that once a country’s level of socioeconomic development gets above the United Nations Human Development Index score of 0.8, the so-called secular transition, Mormon membership growth decreases to the 1 to 2 percent range annually.⁷³ A similar membership growth decrease is visible among Jehovah’s Witnesses and emerging among Pentecostal churches in some countries in the Southern Hemisphere. With LDS growth rates currently so low in most parts of the world, a second important conclusion here is that the LDS Church should focus its time and resources on tackling retention (i.e., on campaigns to win back inactive members).

Yet the continued growth of Seventh-day Adventists in the Global South is also proof that a higher sustained level of future membership

72. Cooper and Hernández de Olarte, “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Mexico,” 392.

73. Ryan T. Cragun and Ronald Lawson, “The Secular Transition: The Worldwide Growth of Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Adventists,” *Sociology of Religion* 71, no. 3 (2010): 370.

growth is still potentially possible for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.⁷⁴ However, this may only happen if the Church can come to accept a more decentralized leadership structure that ends the prime role of Utah headquarters culture as colonizer over the colonized in other continents. When Mormons in Europe and Latin America are allowed more freedoms and their own culturally appropriate forms of worship, LDS growth may well pick up again.

74. Gooren, "Comparing Mormon and Adventist Growth Patterns."

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Sarah Winegar, "Enmeshed," 14" x 11",
woodcut print, 2022

ELDRIDGE CLEAVER'S SPIRITUAL ODYSSEY AND EMBRACE OF MORMONISM

Newell G. Bringhurst

Eldridge Cleaver, one-time Black Panther, author of the critically acclaimed best-selling memoir *Soul on Ice*, and notorious fugitive from justice, was the most famous African American to join the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints immediately following the 1978 Black Revelation.¹ Cleaver's baptism took place in December 1983, some three

1. Among the numerous secondary works chronicling the life of Eldridge Cleaver are three important book-length studies: Kathleen Rout, *Eldridge Cleaver* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991); Kathleen Cleaver, ed., *Target Zero: Eldridge Cleaver a Life in Writing* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); and Justin Gifford, *Revolution or Death: The Life of Eldridge Cleaver* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2020). Cleaver himself recalled the events of his life in two very different memoirs: *Soul on Ice* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1968) and *Soul on Fire* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1978). Three other book-length studies are worthy of note. They are Robert Scheer, ed., *Eldridge Cleaver: Post-Prison Writings and Speeches* (New York: Random House, 1969), which provides further insights on Cleaver's radical activism during the late 1960s. Whereas George Otis, *Eldridge Cleaver: Ice and Fire* (Van Nuys, Calif.: Bible Voices, 1977), and John A. Oliver, *Eldridge Cleaver Reborn* (Plainfield, N.J.: Logas International, 1977), both focus on Cleaver's emergence as a "born-again Christian" following his return to the United States in the wake of his exile abroad.

years after his initial contact with the Church. He remained a member of record up to the time of his death on May 1, 1998.²

Cleaver's involvement with Mormonism has received minimal attention in three recent biographies. Kathleen Rout's *Eldridge Cleaver* dismisses the one-time Black Panther's conversion to Mormonism as simply "a complete rejection of a positive black identity."³ Justin Gifford, through the pages of *Revolution or Death: The Life of Eldridge Cleaver*, likewise downplays Cleaver's so-called "dabbling in Mormonism" although concedes that his conversion "shocked the world."⁴ Finally, *Target Zero: Eldridge Cleaver a Life in Writing*, edited by Cleaver's one-time wife, Kathleen, makes no mention whatsoever of his Mormon interlude.⁵

2. Three accounts dealing with Cleaver's involvement with Mormonism include: Richard J. Jensen and John C. Hammerback, "From Muslim to Mormon: Eldridge Cleaver's Rhetorical Crusade," *Communications Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (Winter 1986): 24–40; Newell G. Bringhurst, "Eldridge Cleaver's Passage Through Mormonism," *Journal of Mormon History*, 28, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 81–110; and Jesse Walker, "Eldridge Cleaver: The Mormon Years," *Friday A/V Club*, posted online May 7, 2021. Also see Newell G. Bringhurst and Craig L. Foster, *The Mormon Quest for the Presidency* (Independence, Mo.: John Whitmer Books, 2008), 162–183, which focuses on Cleaver's 1968 campaign for president as the nominee of the insurgent Peace and Freedom Party.

3. Rout, *Eldridge Cleaver*, 260. Underscoring the author's superficial knowledge of Cleaver's involvement with the Church, and indeed Mormonism in general, Rout mistakenly dates his conversion to "sometime in 1982" while characterizing Mormonism as "a religion that does not permit blacks to hold significant offices in the hierarchy" further stating that "among major American religion [Mormonism] is the only one with an overtly anti-black creed," (259–260).

4. Gifford, *Revolution or Death*, 263–264. Gifford, moreover, misrepresents Cleaver's response to Mormonism's recently lifted black priesthood ban, mistakenly asserting that Cleaver dismissed its significance "by pointing out that the Mormons, unlike Christians had never owned any slaves" (263).

5. Cleaver, *Target Zero*. Although in a foreword penned for the volume, Henry Louis Gates Jr. makes passing reference to Cleaver's involvement with the Church: "We were even more shocked when [Eldridge] announced his conversion, a la Charles Colson, to a born-again variety of Christianity, including eventually a sojourn with the Mormons" (viii).

This article seeks to redress such omissions and misperceptions, arguing that Cleaver's involvement with the Church represents an important phase in the one-time Black militant's lifelong odyssey as a religious seeker. Much of this story is drawn from an unpublished autobiography Cleaver penned in the wake of his contact with Mormonism and from interviews conducted with Latter-day Saints who knew and interacted with the former Black Panther.⁶

Born in 1935 in Wabasika, Arkansas, LeRoy Eldridge Cleaver was brought up Baptist by his devoutly religious mother. As an adolescent, he converted to Catholicism. Following that he became a militant Black Muslim during his lengthy twelve years of incarceration in a series of California prisons. After his 1975 return to the United States, following a six-year exile abroad, Cleaver proclaimed himself a born-again Christian, involving himself in a number of different Christian groups and causes. He also tried, with limited success, to establish his own Eldridge Cleaver Crusades and later his own congregation, the Third Cross of the Holy Ghost. He attempted to create his own religion, Christlam—a hybrid body of beliefs drawn from Christianity and Islam.⁷ Cleaver subsequently involved himself with Rev. Sun Myung Moon's Unification

6. In fact, significant portions of the previously unpublished *The Autobiography of Eldridge Cleaver*, as labeled, have been included in Kathleen Cleaver's edited *Target Zero*, specifically, chapters 1 and 2, 9–14; chapter 4, 195–198; chapter 7, 265–270; and chapter 9, 275–278. Omitted from *Target Zero* is the section discussing Cleaver's involvement with the Church. A typescript copy of this latter section was provided to this author courtesy of Justin Gifford as part of a fifty-five-page unpublished manuscript he obtained directly from Kathleen Cleaver in the process of researching his *Death or Revolution*. According to Gifford, the manuscript was subsequently deposited in the Kathleen Cleaver Papers at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. However, efforts to locate the manuscript in that collection have been unsuccessful.

7. Rout, *Eldridge Cleaver*, 152–157. Christlam had an unusual “social auxiliary” called “Guardians of the Sperm,” “formed in response to Cleaver's assertion that ‘the dwelling place of God’ was not in the North African desert in Meca, as in traditional Muslim belief, but ‘in the male Sperm’ Cleaver saw his church's mission clearly as a sex facilitator,” as further noted by Rout.

Church through his support of Project Volunteer.⁸ In sum, as Cleaver himself recalled: “I like to study religion. . . . I have been a Moonie, a Black Muslim, a Catholic, a Baptist, a Jehovah’s Witness, a Seventh-day Adventist. . . . I guess that’s all.”⁹

Cleaver’s initial interest in Mormonism came in the late 1970s.¹⁰ His wife, Kathleen, having attended a Bible study class in which her group had been studying the book of Hebrews, asked her husband “about Melchizedek, a man without a father, without mother, neither beginning of days or end of life, made like unto the Son of God abiding in the priesthood continually.” Kathleen’s query prompted Eldridge to read the whole book of Hebrews noting that “somehow, I knew this was something very important. I also felt there was something special about [Kathleen] bringing this to my attention,” adding “there was a spiritual quality about this experience.” Eldridge asked his own Bible teacher “what he knew about Melchizedek,” who responded by becoming “very upset” and “very quickly changed the subject.” In response, Cleaver “started bugging everybody,” asking, “What about Melchizedek?” “Whenever, I asked about Melchizedek” while traveling about speaking at various “churches and theological seminaries the response was negative. I couldn’t figure out what was going on.”¹¹

Ultimately, Cleaver came across a book on communal architecture, containing a drawing of the interior of Kirtland Temple, “showing two podiums, one for the Aaronic Priesthood and one for the Melchizedek Priesthood.” “‘What is this?’ I said, out loud. The Mormons know

8. Walker, “Eldridge Cleaver.” Although as Walker further notes, “it wasn’t completely clear how he felt about Moon’s religion.”

9. Al Martinez, “Eldridge Cleaver: Time Tempers the Passions, Dreams,” *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 1, 1981, 1–3.

10. Eldridge Cleaver, “Unfinished Autobiography” (unpublished manuscript). Original in Kathleen Cleaver Papers, Emory University, Special Collections Library, Atlanta, Georgia.

11. Cleaver, “Unfinished Autobiography.”

something about Melchizedek.” This prompted Cleaver to learn more. He initially contemplated attending a church service at an LDS ward house near his home in Menlo Park, but he held back. As he later recalled, “I had heard many things about the Mormons. Like how they didn’t want black people in their church. I was afraid they might not let me in, and I would . . . get my feelings hurt.”¹² All of this occurred in 1980.

In September 1980, Cleaver encountered Carl Loeber, a former associate from his days as a radical activist, who had recently joined the LDS Church. Loeber had served as Cleaver’s campaign manager during his 1968 campaign for president on the Peace and Freedom Party ticket.¹³ As Cleaver jokingly recalled: “I didn’t recognize him because he was so clean shaven, he had a short, neat haircut, and was wearing a suit. The last time I saw him he was so greasy; you’d need ice prongs to grab a hold of him.” Loeber, in describing his involvement with the Church, declared that he had held the Melchizedek Priesthood “for about ten years.” Immediately, Cleaver “started asking all kinds of questions about Melchizedek,” prompting Loeber to reply, simply, “I know some young men who can answer all your questions.”¹⁴

Thus began the three-year process leading to Cleaver’s ultimate baptism into the Church. Initially, Cleaver met with the stake missionaries in the home of Dennis and Sonja Peterson in Cupertino. At the time, Peterson was bishop of the San Jose Sixth Ward and later president of the San Jose Stake. His wife, Sonja, was the niece of future LDS Church President Ezra Taft Benson. Cleaver’s interest in Mormonism caught the immediate attention of high LDS Church officials,

12. Cleaver, “Unfinished Autobiography,” 49–50.

13. For a discussion of Cleaver’s 1968 presidential campaign, see Newell G. Bringham and Craig L. Foster, “Eldridge Cleaver,” in *The Mormon Quest for the Presidency*, 162–183.

14. Cleaver, “Unpublished Autobiography,” 50.

specifically President Benson himself, who inquired directly with the Petersons concerning the extent of Cleaver's interest in the Church.¹⁵

Cleaver met privately with Paul H. Dunn, a member of the First Council of the Seventy and regional administrator for California. Dunn, like Benson, carefully assessed the former Black Panther's desire to join the Church. But as Cleaver recalled, Dunn "would not allow me to get baptized" despite an immediate desire to join. The reason was because "I was still on probation. [Dunn] felt I should clear up my differences with the law before joining the Church."¹⁶

Through Carl Loeber, Cleaver met another prominent Latter-day Saint, W. Cleon Skousen, with whom he developed a close relationship. Skousen, a Brigham Young University (BYU) professor of religion, was the founder/president of the Freeman Institute—a conservative, anti-communist political education organization.¹⁷ The two initially met at a "Know Your Religion" event at which Skousen was the featured speaker. As Cleaver recalled, "I was overwhelmed with the words of Dr. Skousen. From my own political background, and my experiences in the communist countries, I knew he was telling the truth. I was relieved to hear so much sound thinking from an anti-communist." Taking note of Skousen's central argument that the LDS Church stood as a bulwark against communism, Cleaver further praised what he had to say: "Hearing him speak about the Gospel and politics at the same time really made sense to me. I believe the world could not be saved without the Gospel, but it was communism, a political force, that was fighting God and the spreading of the Gospel more than any other single force." Cleaver then concluded, characterizing Skousen, "a fanatic, just like me,

15. Sonja Benson Peterson, telephone interview by Newell G. Bringhurst, Apr. 28, 2022.

16. Cleaver, "Unpublished Autobiography," 53.

17. W. Cleon Skousen, telephone interview by Newell G. Bringhurst, June 4, 1996.

fighting for the gospel, while struggling for freedom and America.”¹⁸ Skousen, taking note of Cleaver's like-minded beliefs and rhetorical skills, signed him on as a regular speaker for the Freeman Institute. All of this, in turn, further facilitated Cleaver's desire to become a Latter-day Saint.

Meanwhile, Cleaver continued to meet and interact with Dennis and Sonja Peterson, developing a close congenial relationship, ultimately becoming good friends. As Cleaver recalled, Peterson, a biology professor at De Anza Community College, “had a beautiful way of sharing the gospel. . . . I was very impressed to hear the gospel taught by a man who was also a scientist.”¹⁹ Cleaver, along with Kathleen and their two young children, son Maceo and daughter Joju, became frequent guests in the Peterson home, invited to dinners and interacting socially, with their young children becoming playmates. Sonja Peterson fondly recalls Eldridge as “light, kind, and soft-spoken,” further characterizing both Eldridge and Kathleen as “impressive both in demeanor and intellect.” Eldridge was “extremely proud” of his children as well as his wife, Sonja further recalled. But at the same time, Kathleen, in contrast to her husband, “never indicated any interest, whatsoever, in the Church.”²⁰

Kathleen, in fact, left Eldridge in September 1981, accompanied by their two children, moving to New Haven, Connecticut, to attend Yale University on a scholarship. Eldridge was unable to accompany them, given the terms of his probation, and thus extremely reluctant to see them leave. Although the couple put a good face on their separation, the marriage had been turbulent, allegedly marred by infidelity and abusive behavior on the part of Eldridge.²¹ Kathleen recalled “the tre-

18. Cleaver, “Unpublished Autobiography,” 52.

19. Cleaver, “Unpublished Autobiography,” 52–53.

20. Sonia Peterson, telephone interview by Newell G. Bringham, Apr. 28, 2022.

21. As vividly described and thoroughly documented by Gifford, *Revolution or Death*. See in particular 145, 149, 192–193, 197–199, 266–267, 289.

mendous strains” on their marriage during this period, adding, “We grew distant from each other, no longer sharing the same aspirations and beliefs.” Being without his wife and children proved extremely difficult for Eldridge, given that “he adored his children and his awareness of life’s spiritual dimension was stimulated as he watched them grow up.”²² Eldridge repeatedly tried to renew Kathleen’s interest in the Church during his visits to New Haven, “possibly delaying his baptism in the hopes that she would have a change of heart.”²³

Following Kathleen’s departure, Eldridge, finding himself without a place to live, took up temporary residence with Lee Senior, a mutual friend of both Cleaver and Carl Loeber. Like Loeber, Senior was an active, practicing Latter-day Saint. Senior provided Cleaver short-term employment as a tree trimmer with his Blue Ox Tree Company. At the same time, Lee, along with his brother John, acting as informal missionaries, further instructed Cleaver on Mormon doctrine and practice.²⁴

Concurrently, Cleaver “started going to church all the time,” initially attending with Carl Loeber at the San Jose Sixth Ward in Cupertino. Ultimately, he began attending on his own. However, he confessed to being uncomfortable and feeling “very strange” within the congregation “seeing nothing but white people.” But he said, “Still I felt good being there, that there, given that there was a purpose for me being there.”²⁵

Given this situation, Cleaver expressed a desire “to talk to some black” Latter-day Saints. Accordingly, local Church officials arranged for Cleaver to meet some black missionaries. One was Danny Frazier,

22. Kathleen Cleaver, “Introduction,” in *Target Zero*, xxii, xxiv.

23. Robert Gamblin, telephone interview by Newell G. Bringhurst, June 3, 1996.

24. Lee Senior, telephone interview by Newell G. Bringhurst, Apr. 26, 2022.

25. Cleaver, “Unpublished Autobiography.”

a one-time linebacker for the BYU football team. Cleaver characterized Frazier as “as a shining jewel of a young man” who related to Cleaver how he became a missionary. Frazier explained how he had been so hung up on football that he didn’t think he would have become a missionary. However, “he broke his neck while playing for the university, which he proclaimed “a blessing in disguise” declaring himself “really happy to be on a mission.” Frazier went on to bear his testimony, which Cleaver claimed “relaxed me on the whole question of whether or not blacks belonged in the Mormon Church.” Cleaver also met with a second black missionary, Alan Cherry, who likewise “shared a very powerful testimony.”²⁶

Cleaver’s commitment to the Church was further strengthened by his close association with Skousen. Cleaver’s initial speech for the Freeman Institute was in January 1981 to the Century Club on the campus of BYU, attended by an audience of more than nine hundred. Subsequently Cleaver, with Skousen’s enthusiastic backing, spoke at some twenty-five to thirty events throughout the western United States and into Canada.²⁷ Cleaver was reportedly paid some \$500 for each lecture he delivered.²⁸

Cleaver and Skousen became extremely close, despite their contrasting backgrounds and experiences. Skousen was a one-time Federal Bureau of Investigation agent and former Salt Lake City police chief prior to his founding the Freedom Institute. He had, moreover, vigorously defended Mormonism’s black priesthood ban prior to 1978, lambasting its critics of “distorting [this] religious tenet . . . regarding the Negro” labeling them “Communist dupes.”²⁹ Such differences

26. Cleaver, “Unpublished Autobiography,” 52.

27. W. Cleon Skousen, telephone interview by Newell G. Bringham, June 4, 1996.

28. According to Carl Loeber, telephone interview by Newell G. Bringham, Apr. 20, 2022.

29. W. Cleon Skousen, “The Communist Attack on the Mormons,” 1970.

notwithstanding, the pair shared extreme conservative and strident anticommunist beliefs. During visits to Utah, Skousen provided Cleaver lodging and other accommodations.

Linda Kimball, executive secretary of the Freeman Institute, actually scheduled Cleaver's speaking engagements. In the process, the two developed a close relationship. Kimball characterized Cleaver "a brother" whom she "loved very much." At the same time, she expressed concern about Eldridge and Kathleen's turbulent marriage (the pair was still together at this point), noting that "they argued a lot," adding that Kathleen clearly "had her own agenda."³⁰

Concurrently, Cleaver formed a close association with Sun Myung Moon and his Unification Church, lecturing at colleges and universities throughout the United States under the sponsorship of the College Association for the Research of Principles (CARP). Unification officials characterized Cleaver as an "associate and friend," further noting that "a lot of our ideas are similar." Cleaver agreed that his "association with them has been a positive one" but denied any intention of becoming a member. Rather he characterized himself a "spiritual guerilla in the army of Jesus."³¹ Whatever the case, Cleaver was reportedly paid \$1,500 for each speech he delivered on behalf of CARP.³²

Meanwhile, in early 1981, Cleaver made clear his intention to join the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which attracted media attention in Utah and throughout the nation.³³ Cleaver himself, when

30. Linda Kimball, telephone interview by Newell G. Bringhurst, Apr. 27, 2022.

31. Martinez, "Eldridge Cleaver," I-3.

32. According to Lee Senior, telephone conversation by Newell G. Bringhurst, Apr. 26 2022.

33. Peter Gillins, "Ex-Radical Mulling Mormonism," *Salt Lake Tribune*, Jan. 23, 1981, B-2; Larry Werner, "Cleaver Studies LDS Teachings," *Salt Lake Tribune*, Feb. 11, 1981, D-1; "Cleaver Vows to Join LDS," *Salt Lake Tribune*, Apr. 6, 1981, B-1; "Cleaver Sets Baptism after Parole," *Salt Lake Tribune*, Oct. 11, 1981; "Cleaver to Join LDS Church," *Deseret News*, Apr. 3, 1981; "Cleaver Says

asked about his decision, told a newspaper reporter, "I am very enthusiastic about what I am learning . . . my spiritual journey in the past five years has led me to this point."³⁴ To another reporter he remarked that becoming a Mormon would be the culmination of a long search "for someplace to fit in. . . . I just feel at home in the church."³⁵ He further noted to a third media representative that he was drawn to the faith by "the warmth" that individual Latter-day Saints manifested toward others and appreciated "the church's emphasis on close families."³⁶ And to yet a fourth reporter, Cleaver claimed he had found his spiritual home declaring: "You find a different spirit in different groups, and the spirit among Latter-day Saints [is one] that I feel comfortable and at home with."³⁷

Finally, nearly three years later on December 11, 1983, Cleaver was formally baptized a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints at the Oakland Inter-Stake Center—the ordinance performed by his good friend, Carl Loeber. He was then confirmed by Dennis Peterson, likewise a close family friend and Cleaver's former bishop. The service was "well-attended," attracting "upwards of 100 people including many of Cleaver's LDS friends from the San Jose area." At the same time, Dean Criddle Bishop of the Oakland First Ward, to which Cleaver belonged following his move from San Jose to Oakland, acknowledged

He Will Join Church," *Deseret News*, Apr. 6, 1981; "Mormons Say Eldridge Cleaver's Planning to Convert," *New York Times*, Jan. 24, 1981, 46; "Eldridge Cleaver Converted," *Indianapolis Star*, Apr. 7 1981; "Eldridge Cleaver May Join Mormon Church," *Jet*, Feb. 19, 1981; Lynne Baranski and Richard Lemon, "Black Panthers No More, Eldridge and Kathleen Cleaver Now Lionize the US System," *People Weekly*, March 22, 1982.

34. George Raine, "Cleaver Promotes God, Patriotism," *Salt Lake Tribune*, Feb. 12, 1981, B-1.

35. "Cleaver Says He Will Join Church," *Deseret News*, Apr. 6, 1981.

36. Martinez, "Eldridge Cleaver"; "Cleaver Sees Baptism after Parole," *Salt Lake Tribune*, Oct. 11, 1981, B-1.

37. "Cleaver to Join LDS Church."

that the new convert had “a high profile in the sense of name recognition in this area.” He carefully added, “Only time will tell how well he is accepted in the Church, but I think the members of this ward will accept Eldridge just as they would any other convert baptism.” Later that same month, on December 25, Bishop Criddle ordained Cleaver a Priest in the Aaronic Priesthood.³⁸ In January 1984, Cleaver addressed an assembled group of Latter-day Saint faithful at a Fireside in Walnut Creek, detailing his spiritual odyssey culminating in becoming a Latter-day Saint, forcefully concluding with a powerful personal testimony as to the truthfulness of the Gospel.³⁹

However, Cleaver’s direct involvement in the Church soon waned and completely ended by the late 1980s, although he remained a member of record. According to Bishop Criddle, Cleaver “attended episodically” the Oakland First Ward and when present was more an “interested observer” rather than an “active participant.” Criddle attributed Cleaver’s frequent absences to his schedule as a speaker with the Freeman Institute and involvement in local politics.⁴⁰

Cleaver’s activities continued to wane following his move from Oakland to Berkeley in 1985. Robert Gamblin, Berkeley ward bishop, recalls Cleaver’s “sporadic attendance,” adding that when present “[he] kept pretty much to himself,” further noting that he was not one to socialize with fellow ward members.⁴¹ Cleaver’s involvement with the Berkeley ward had come to a complete halt by the time Steven Ferguson succeeded Gamblin as bishop. Cleaver’s inactivity caused concern at LDS Church headquarters, with Church officials directly inquiring

38. “Eldridge Cleaver Baptized!” *The Sunstone Review*, Feb. 1984, 6.

39. Eldridge Cleaver, remarks delivered at Fireside in Walnut Creek, Jan. 8, 1984.

40. Dean Criddle, telephone conversation with Newell G. Bringhurst, June 2, 1996.

41. Robert Gamblin, telephone conversation with Newell G. Bringhurst, June 3, 1996.

as to Cleaver's status.⁴² In one last effort at reactivation, Cleaver was encouraged to attend the Oakland Ninth Branch—a predominately black congregation. As recalled by Branch President Edgar A. Whittingham, himself an African American, Cleaver attended only a couple of times, although he participated in a Black History Day observance sponsored by the branch.⁴³

The obvious question is: what factors prompted Cleaver's precipitous withdrawal from Church activity—most surprising given his extreme enthusiasm prior to actual baptism? Most important were the residual effects of Cleaver's separation and ultimate divorce from Kathleen. Eldridge was left alone with her departure; she took their two young children. Particularly difficult was losing primary custody of his son and daughter. Eldridge had been a caring, committed parent. His son, Ahmad Maceo, fondly recalled: "My sister and I had a warm relationship [with him], even throughout his [difficult] struggles with our mother."⁴⁴ Aggravating the situation was Kathleen's steadfast refusal to become a Latter-day Saint, despite Eldridge's repeated efforts to get her to join, right up to the time of their final divorce in 1986.⁴⁵

Also contributing to Cleaver's lapse into inactivity was his change of residence, moving from San Jose to Oakland, and, ultimately, to Berkeley. In the process, he left behind a close circle of Latter-day Saints with whom he had interacted during the three years prior to his baptism. The most important of these were Carl Loeber and Lee Senior, along with Dennis and Sonja Peterson, all of with whom he developed close friendships. By contrast, he was unable and/or unwilling to cultivate a

42. Steven Ferguson, telephone conversation with Newell G. Bringhurst, June 2, 1996.

43. Edgar A. Whittingham, telephone conversation with Newell G. Bringhurst, May 31, 1996.

44. Ahmad Maceo Cleaver, as quoted in Gifford, *Revolution or Death*, 256.

45. Robert Gamblin, telephone conversation with Newell G. Bringhurst, June 3, 1996.

similar level of interaction with any of his coreligionists in the Oakland and/or Berkely wards. Further aggravating his estrangement, he stood out as a single, divorced African American in both wards, given that the vast majority of the members were white, with a significant portion married and with families. By contrast, a mere handful of African Americans attended the two wards.

With acute perception, Sonja Peterson noted that Cleaver “would have been much better off if he could have gotten out of the Bay Area.”⁴⁶ Likewise, W. Cleon Skousen failed to convince Cleaver to move from the Bay Area to Salt Lake City, thus placing him closer to both the Church and the activities of the Freeman Institute. Worse still, Skousen was ultimately forced to dismiss Cleaver as a Freeman Institute speaker, given his continuing failure to show up at events at which he was scheduled to speak. Skousen later lamented, Cleaver “lost his grip” in the wake of his divorce, “collapsing” both mentally and psychologically.⁴⁷

A third factor drawing Cleaver away from the Church was his active involvement in local and state politics. In early 1984, Cleaver announced his candidacy for a seat in the US House of Representatives as an Independent, in opposition to incumbent Democrat Ronald Dellums, among the most liberal members of Congress who represented the region encompassing Oakland and Berkeley. In emphasizing his own qualification as a staunch conservative and fiery anticommunist, Cleaver lambasted Dellums as “a pliable tool in the hands of the Marxist-Leninist puppet masters . . . [and] a third world worshipper.”⁴⁸ But the lively contest between the two African Americans ended in August 1984 with Cleaver’s withdrawal, as he instead opted to run for a seat on the Berkeley City Council. Again, Cleaver campaigned as an arch

46. Sonja Peterson, telephone conversation with Newell G. Bringhurst.

47. W. Cleon Skousen, telephone conversation with Newell G. Bringhurst, June 4, 1996.

48. Katherine Ellison, “Eldridge Cleaver Squares Off Against ‘Cesspool’ of the Left,” *San Jose Mercury-News*, March 3, 1984, A-7.

conservative lambasting the City's rent control laws and its antibusiness atmosphere, positions that did not go down well, given Berkeley's reputation as a bastion of left-wing radicalism. Not surprisingly, Cleaver finished dead last in a field of fourteen candidates.⁴⁹

Undaunted, Cleaver made one last bid for political office. In 1986, he sought the Republican nomination for a US Senate seat. In what was a high-profile contest, Cleaver managed to temporarily capture the limelight with his witty one-liners, characterizing himself as "a leader with a proven track record [and] Ronald Reagan Black Panther."⁵⁰ In the actual contest, Cleaver fell far short, finishing eighth in a crowded field of twelve candidates.

In all three contests, Cleaver deliberately avoided any reference to his LDS Church membership. Moreover, following his abortive quest for a seat in the House of Representatives, he accused his two campaign managers, both Latter-day Saints, of stealing some \$350,000 in campaign contributions, further lamenting that neither the government nor the LDS Church disciplined the men for their actions. This, in turn, further facilitated his estrangement from the Church.⁵¹

In the wake of his failure in the political arena, Cleaver became more erratic and unpredictable in his behavior and actions, which, in turn, pushed him even further away from the Church. Such behavior resulted in large part from the fact that he continued to struggle financially. He sought publication of a series of essays and poems that he continued to write during this period, albeit unsuccessfully. He also

49. "Eldridge Cleaver Runs for Berkeley City Council," *Fresno Bee*, Aug. 13, 1984, A-2; Barry M. Horstman and Maura Dolan, "Indicted Mayor Victor in San Diego Balloting," *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 7, 1984.

50. Jeff Rainmudo, "Mud-Slinging GOP Convention," *Fresno Bee*, Mar. 9, 1986, A-#; Jim Boren, "Candidates Seeking Support Platform for Republican Delegates," *Fresno Bee*, Apr. 1, 1986, A-1.

51. Jennifer Skordas, "Cleaver Did It: From Panthers to Mormonism," *Salt Lake Tribune*, Feb. 15, 1995.

made and sold handcrafted flower pots and sculptures and collected and sold recycled cans and bottles that he had gathered off the streets—all such endeavors producing limited revenue.⁵²

In desperation, Cleaver promoted a bizarre money-making scheme, dubbed “The Treasure Island Liberation Front.” He hoped to take over Treasure Island—a US Navy Installation in the San Francisco Bay between Oakland and San Francisco, where he claimed a treasure chest of jewels had been secretly buried years earlier. He claimed that he possessed a map revealing the treasure’s location and proceeded to lobby the San Francisco Board of Supervisors to demilitarize Treasure Island to facilitate a search for the treasure. Calling himself “Captain Cleaver,” he offered to disclose the location of the treasure on condition that he be allowed to keep it. Not surprisingly, local officials ignored his unusual request.⁵³

Cleaver was no stranger to bizarre money-making schemes. A decade earlier, he had designed a uniquely styled men’s pants. Dubbed the “Cleavers,” his pants contained an exterior codpiece that highlighted the male genitals. Critics were quick to condemn his unusual pants as “frivolous and risqué.” Undaunted, Cleaver defended his jeans as “a statement against the unisexual ideology that has been structured into our clothing and being pushed by organized homosexuals.”⁵⁴ He further asserted that the Cleavers were “destined to revolutionize men’s fashion and corner [the] world market” while freeing men from what he called “the fig leaf mentality.” His pants, he asserted, would eventually make blue jeans look like ‘girl’ pants.” Despite his efforts at

52. Gifford, *Revolution or Death*, 276–280.

53. “Cleaver Says Treasure Buried at Navy Base,” *Visalia Times-Delta*, Sept. 25, 1987. A-3; “Eldridge Cleaver Leads Fight to ‘Liberate’ Treasure Island,” *Oakland Tribune*, Sept. 25, 1987.

54. Randy Frame, “Whatever Happened to Eldridge Cleaver?,” *Christianity Today*, Apr. 20, 1984, 38.

promotion, including a sexually explicit ad in *Rolling Stone* magazine, the Cleavers proved a flop.⁵⁵

In response to his continuing series of disappointments, personal, political, and financial, Cleaver sought solace in drugs, specifically crack cocaine, which was “flooding Oakland and other inner-city neighborhoods across the United States in the mid-1980s.”⁵⁶ Cleaver's addiction precipitated yet a further decline in his fortunes. In October 1987 and again in June 1992, he was arrested on charges involving possession of crack cocaine. Most serious, in March 1994, Cleaver was attacked and nearly killed in a crack deal gone bad. He was robbed and hit hard on the head with a blunt instrument. Found by police dazed and wandering the streets of Oakland, he was initially arrested. But upon discovering the extent of his injuries, authorities rushed Cleaver to a local hospital where he underwent five hours of emergency surgery for bleeding between the brain and skull. Following that, he went through a lengthy period of recuperation.⁵⁷

Meanwhile, Cleaver found companionship during this painful period with Karen Koelker, whom he met through a mutual acquaintance. The two enjoyed an intimate relationship, with Karen becoming pregnant. But upon discovering that their child-to-be showed signs of serious birth defects, the medical professionals with whom they consulted “urged her to have an abortion.” But the couple rejected this option. “We wanted the child, and when our son was born, [in 1986] I didn't see anything bad about him. I just saw him as little.” They named their son Riley, and despite being born with Down syndrome, Eldridge “loved him fiercely.” Though the couple never married, “they shared an intimate relationship through their coparenting of Riley,” who provided

55. As quoted in Gifford, *Revolution or Death*, 238–240. The provocative *Rolling Stone* ad stated: “Walking Softly But Carrying it Big . . . You'll be Cock of the Walk with the New Fall Collection from Eldridge de Paris” (240).

56. Gifford, *Revolution or Death*, 276–281.

57. Bringhurst, “Eldridge Cleaver's Passage Through Mormonism,” 101–102.

Eldridge “a much-needed source of affection throughout the rest of his life.”⁵⁸

Cleaver’s withdrawal from active involvement in the LDS Church notwithstanding, he was vacillating concerning his own beliefs and about Mormonism in general. As Carl Loeber, his close friend and fellow Latter-day Saint sagaciously noted, “Cleaver’s commitment to the Church was ambivalent and nontraditional in that he wanted to be a Mormon but did not want to make the commitment to go to Church on a regular basis.”⁵⁹ In a 1988 interview with *Ebony* magazine, Cleaver characterized himself as a “devout Mormon,” further stating that the Church had “an adherence to the gospel [and] a very positive program for human beings, for families and so forth” but carefully adding “the fact that Black people were not traditionally [Mormons] was obvious to me.”⁶⁰ Some seven years later, he confessed to a *Salt Lake Tribune* reporter that while he was “no longer active in the Church, anymore” he remained a “supporter,” further stating, “I am powerfully impressed with the message of the Church and the social practice of the Church. They do a very good job of taking care of their people [but] I wish they would allow women to have a more equitable role.”⁶¹

However, Cleaver made no reference to his involvement in the Church in a series of subsequent media interviews. Responding to a question about the role of spirituality in his own life, he assigned it a “central role” given that “fundamentally our challenge is to respect and love one another” and to “get rid of all of our pet hates, particularly racism and misogyny.”⁶² Similarly, in a July 1995 interview conducted

58. Gifford, *Revolution or Death*, 274–275.

59. Carl Loeber, interview by Newell G. Bringhurst, Aug. 8, 1996.

60. “Whatever Happened to . . . Eldridge Cleaver?” *Ebony*, May 30, 1996.

61. Skordas, “Cleaver Did It,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, Feb. 15, 1995.

62. Michael Peter Langevin, “Eldridge Cleaver: You Say You Want a Revolution,” *Magical Blend Magazine*, no. 48, online edition.

by Mike Castro of the California-based McClatchy News Service, Cleaver made no mention of his Mormon affiliation, simply characterizing his "current religious views [as] attuned more to nature and less to an established institution."⁶³ A year later, in April 1996, *People Weekly* quoted Cleaver, stating, "Christianity is my reality now," in describing his then-current association with the Daniel Iverson Center for Christian Studies in Miami, Florida.⁶⁴

Finally, at the memorial service held at the Wesley United Methodist Church following Cleaver's death on May 1, 1998, no mention was made of Cleaver's Mormonism. Although he had been nicknamed "the rage" during his Black Panther days, he was eulogized as "a gentle spirit." His tombstone at the Mountain View Cemetery in Altadena, California, was inscribed with the epitaph: "A loving Heart, An Open Hand."⁶⁵

In conclusion, the obvious question is: what is to be made of Eldridge Cleaver's encounter with Mormonism? Some have questioned the sincerity of Cleaver's conversion. John George, a longtime acquaintance and former fellow Black Panther, labeled Cleaver "a con artist [who] could have conned himself so that he believes. . . . Isn't that a kind of religiosity?"⁶⁶ Assessing Cleaver's conversion from a vastly different perspective, writer James Craig Holte suggested that Cleaver's most outstanding trait was "continual change," characterizing him as an individual who seized "the opportunity to make himself over more than once," carefully adding that he was not unique in this regard: "Most

63. Mike Castro, "Soul Searcher," *Fresno Bee*, July 27, 1995.

64. "Free at Last," *People Weekly*, April 15, 1996, 80.

65. Patrick J. McDonnell, "Ex-Panther Is Mourned," *Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 1998, B-1, B-2; "Former Black Panther Leader Cleaver Dies," *Visalia Times-Delta*, May 2, 1998, A-1, B-2.

66. Quoted in Martinez, "Eldridge Cleaver," I-3.

people undergo a series of transformation events in their lives that can be called conversions.”⁶⁷

Eldridge Cleaver’s passage through Mormonism provides an intriguing case study into the complex nature of religious conversion. Mormon historian Thomas Alexander has suggested that Cleaver’s involvement with the Church represents a forlorn “search for community” that eluded him throughout his turbulent life.⁶⁸ Whereas sociologists Richard J. Jensen and John C. Hammerback assert that Cleaver’s “dizzying shifts in associations, actions, and words” were not unique but experienced by many converts.⁶⁹ His embrace of Mormonism, following his involvement with “born again, mainline Christianity” represents what biographer Kathleen Rout has characterized as Cleaver’s return “to the fringe, where he had always felt more comfortable.”⁷⁰ Although, Jensen and Hammerback further argue that Cleaver was “essentially a spiritual and rhetorical being who remained faithful to his primary concern [of seeking] to create his self-portrait as a spiritual individual evolving through a series of religious experiences.”⁷¹ By contrast, religious writer Randy Frame asserts that Cleaver “never matured spiritually because he rejected opportunities to be grounded in the faith,” having “little interest in introspection,” and therefore was “unlikely to be overscrupulous about the sincerity of his feeling for Jesus.”⁷² Whatever the motives for joining the Church of Jesus Latter-

67. James Craig Holte, *The Conversion Experience in America: A Sourcebook on Religious Conversion Autobiography* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1992), 29.

68. As suggested by Thomas G. Alexander; comments on paper by Newell G. Bringhurst presented at 1996 meeting of the Western Historical Society, 1996. Photocopy in my possession.

69. Jensen and Hammerback, “From Muslim to Mormon,” 24.

70. Rout, *Eldridge Cleaver*, 255.

71. Jensen and Hammerback, “From Muslim to Mormon,” 24, 33–34, 38.

72. Frame, “Whatever Happened to Eldridge Cleaver?,” 39.

day Saints, the story of Eldridge Cleaver's encounter with Mormonism contains elements of irony, pathos, and, alas, unfulfilled potential.

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Sarah Winegar, "Mansions," 13.5" x 10.5",
woodcut print, 2022

A MAN BORN WHEN HE IS OLD

Gabriel González Núñez

His clothes showed neither wealth nor poverty; he dressed with the modesty of the craftsmen from his region, without a single thread of precious metals. He wore a homemade fabric that a woman had labored over as she recreated the patterns she had learned from her elders.

—Tomás de Mattos, *La puerta de la misericordia* (Gate of Mercy)

This took place back in the days when the city was small and its Jewish, dusty streets were trampled under the feet of the most magnificent, powerful empire on the face of the earth. This was the empire that soared like an eagle from the heated deserts of Arabia to the fathomless deep of the Mediterranean Sea to the valleys and mountains of the European continent. From there, from that Europe that did not worship Jehovah, the empire had struck Judea. Under Caesar's ensign, it had pounced upon God's people, advancing in swift chariots that carried men protected by breastplates and pagan arrogance. The empire had comfortably taken control of the sacred province, defiling it with Western traders, Greco-Roman tongues, voracious taxes, and imperial order.

Everyone despised the empire but none quite like Cleopas bar Simon, who housed the rage of hell within the gates of his heart. Since he was but ten years old, since the day he heard Judas of Galilee spit venom out of his mouth causing the true Jews to take up arms against the devilish Romans, Cleopas felt his life had a purpose. That purpose was to completely expel the arrogant foreigner. At night he dreamt of the day when the Roman banners would burn in the wrath of the Lord,

Self-Translated from the Spanish

the legitimate king of Israel, and when Jewish sandals would crush Roman skulls. During the day, he would ride his horse swiftly, like a deadly dart, and attack all presence of the empire. He would enter the villages and beat those treacherous publicans, or he would hide in the ruins of abandoned towns to then have his sling hurl stones at the centurions and their henchmen who could never quite catch up to him. He was as wise as a serpent and moved with the rustling of a dove. He lived in Jerusalem, encircled about by the city's walls, but he reached all of Judea.

One day Cleopas left the city walls and went into the desert, a sandy sea that had forever cleansed the prophets. He headed toward the secret caves where he would meet with other Zealots like himself, some of whom actually lived in desert caves. The desert was the Lord's furnace, where true Jews were purified. The desert, as everlasting as time is endless, had brought forth the law and the prophets. Cleopas was certain that only they who had been transformed—by the dry, burning air; by the blue, distant sky; by the temptation to just die among stones and sand—only they could establish the Lord's kingdom among the covenant people once again.

He arrived at the caves with no name. He dismounted his horse and left it next to other horses that were tied to a beam brought from Damascus. Torch in hand, he followed the natural maze formed by the dry, dark caves until he reached the meeting place. The place was a secret of secrets, a place no Roman knew about or would ever know about. Six other Zealots waited for him there.

"Peace," said Cleopas. Everyone greeted back, and the discussion continued. Cleopas listened attentively. They argued over whether to attack a caravan that the next morning would head out of Jerusalem toward Rome. Everyone agreed that the caravan was worthy of destruction—it was made of cowardly Jews who saw the Romans as their lords when in reality the only true Lord was God. The point of debate was whether there was any strategic importance to the attack.

“It’s not worth it. The only way to establish the kingdom of God is by overthrowing the Romans. Attacking this caravan won’t topple them,” Eleazar bar Abiel said, visibly irritated. “It’s not worth the risk.”

“Are you afraid of danger and sacrifice?” asked Joshua bar Barnabas. Silence followed. The six men looked at Eleazar, expecting an answer. Zealots understood quite well that their cause involved danger and sacrifice. Vile Rome was the greatest empire since the days of Adam. “Who is like unto Rome?” was a question posed in the streets of the world. Everyone marveled at her superiority in the battlefield, at her chariots that sped like wasps, at her arrows like stingers, at her swarm-like armies. But Zealots did not fear Rome because, much like the Maccabees, they were unwavering martyrs in a divine cause.

“No, I fear only the Lord God,” replied Eleazar assertively. “And that is why I think that destroying that caravan is too meager a task for the servants of the Lord. He will be on our right hand and on our left hand. His name is great. Too great for such small matters. His might must be shown through something greater. Without Him, we are nothing, but with Him, even the temple can be ours.”

There was silence yet again. None dared contradict Eleazar’s logic, but the temple was too much for now—too much in the center, too unstable to attempt taking it over. For now.

“Are you afraid? The Lord of Hosts has commanded that we be not afraid, that we be of good courage,” said Eleazar.

Silence.

“Eleazar is right. Alone we cannot do this, but with God all things are possible. If it be His will that He intervene, He will. I believe He already is. The people are enthralled by this new rabbi. This Jesus of Nazareth who challenges the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

Cleopas had heard everywhere of the new, puzzling personage. *The man is a prophet. He surely is a prophet. No, no, the man is Elijah. He can be no one else. But are you blind? Can’t you see he is John the Baptist come back from the tomb? Not John the Baptist. He is a charlatan who tramples*

on the Law of Moses. These and many other things Cleopas had heard about the man. Cleopas was not interested in any of it, until he heard a fisherman say that Jesus was the Messiah foretold in scripture. The idea was nonsense. The Messiah would come in power and glory, and the first thing he would do would be to liberate Israel from the predatory empire. Yet the fisherman believed this Jesus to be the Messiah, and many others followed the supposed Galilean Messiah. Cleopas did not believe in false messiahs, but he knew this man from tiny Nazareth in troublesome Galilee could be a tool in arousing the people to resist Rome and her pagan gods.

Joshua spoke, "Yes, but Jesus of Nazareth does not oppose Rome. He teaches blasphemy. He claims to be the Son of God. He is a heretic worthy of death!"

"It's true, but the people follow him in ignorance," pointed out Cleopas. "They believe his words. They trust his judgment. So we can have Jesus incite the people into anger against the empire. And then, who can be against us? We can take the temple."

The idea consumed Cleopas, but his fellow comrades in arms did not think it wise to try to win over Jesus. Once the meeting was over, as he returned on horseback to Jerusalem, Cleopas continued to think about the likely advantages of enrolling the rabbi from Nazareth. By the time he reached the city gates, he knew what to do.

As the dawn broke the next morning, Cleopas left Jerusalem and traveled north, following the Jordan River to avoid riding into any Samaritan dogs. In his mind, he tried to imagine what the man he was seeking after might be like, how to best approach him, what words to say, and what influence that man could yield in favor of the Zealots. Theirs was the most important cause in the universe. Upon the cause's altar Cleopas had placed all: his life, his time, his every thought, his every passion, everything. The cause was his life. There was no life before or after the cause. If he had to face down a false or even a true Messiah, he would do it for the cause's sake. And this Nazarene could

breathe new life into the cause. Cleopas was certain of it. That is why it was imperative to have that Jesus of Nazareth join the cause. Israel would soon be redeemed.

Cleopas spent the whole trip unwittingly submerged in thoughts of glory and redemption. He arrived in Galilee, a land of windless days and dry nights, without knowing where he might find the rabbi. He also did not know, upon arriving, how extensive Jesus' popularity was—everyone talked about him, and his whereabouts were common knowledge. Cleopas spoke with some traders who told him to follow a certain path that went around a hill. The Zealot followed the path, and as he came around the bend, he found a large multitude—hundreds of people sitting around, talking, cooking, moving here and there—waiting for their Master to continue teaching. Cleopas was surprised to see that many people. He hesitated, concerned about the appropriateness of approaching this Jesus amid so many followers. In the end, he concluded it was even better this way, and he smiled as he considered the hundreds of recruits about him. He forced his way through them, and as he did, he was pleased to hear over and over that the man should be crowned King of the Jews. Cleopas imagined this large crowd turned into soldiers enlisted to bring about the vengeance of the Lord. Young, old, rich, poor, male, and female soldiers, all of them ready to follow him, who they thought should be their ruler.

It was rather easy for Cleopas to recognize the supposed future king of Israel. Roughly twelve men and three women had made a circle around their master. Cleopas watched him from some distance away. He could not help but chuckle quietly at the charcoal-haired man who donned a homemade robe down to his knees and camel-hair sandals. How could such an ordinary person have such control over the masses? Carefully and with some difficulty, Cleopas crept closer to the rabbi.

As Cleopas observed the rabbi from less of a distance, the feelings of mockery vanished. For some reason that Cleopas never managed to figure out, he felt unsure. A sense of insecurity that he had not

experienced around Roman soldiers or felt when thinking of storming the temple or when beating someone up—all the insecurity he never felt before—suddenly fell upon him. Cleopas could now not come any closer. He decided to keep his current distance, close enough to hear but far enough to avoid Jesus looking him in the eye.

The rabbi spoke of the blessedness of the poor in spirit, of those who mourn, of those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, of the merciful, of the pure in heart, of those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, and of the meek, because they will inherit the earth, just like the peacemakers, who will be called “children of God.” Cleopas felt trapped by the rabbi's serene tone of voice that brought warmth into his heart. The certain yet soft words tossed Cleopas back and forth, much the way a storm would rock a boat in the Sea of Galilee. He listened attentively as the rabbi explained that if someone slaps you on your right cheek, you should turn the other also, and that you should love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who mistreat and persecute you.

Cleopas was breathless.

He felt weak.

He could not approach such a man.

The words he heard burned in his mind. With them swirling in his heart, Cleopas decided to return to Jerusalem. Except this time, instead of following the Jordan, he fled into the desert. When night fell upon him, the cold made him tremble, but he had no desire to find refuge or lodging. He felt dirty, filthy. The words he had heard crawled on his skin, and in the itching they caused, he doubted for the first time ever his life's purpose. And every time he thought about his many outrageous actions, a sharp pang, like one might feel when a knife's blade scrapes against the heart, disturbed him. That night, it rained in the desert for the first time in exactly three decades, seven years, and twelve months. Cold, penetrating water sunk deeply into him. Stunned by the cold, the rain, and the inner torment, Cleopas felt a weight on him as

large as it is said Egypt's pyramids are. A pressure as strong as Lebanon's cedars made him sink and kneel, crawl up like a child within his mother's womb. In that position, under the crushing rain of a freezing night in Judea's desert, Cleopas remembered something he had heard that Jesus had said: that unless a man is born again, out of water and spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven. For the first time that night, Cleopas dared look up. He felt a profound sense of peace when he saw the morning's first light.

Three days later, now free from his eternal anguish, he walked into Jerusalem. He looked around, saw the merchants with their oriental perfumes, the soldiers with their northern spears, the Jews with their identity crisis. There was nothing left for him in this place, the city of his youth. Everything he had known and everyone he had associated with now felt like a dream that slowly began to fade in his memory.

A few days later, Eleazar went by Cleopas's house. He clapped his hand, but no one answered. He called loudly, but no one opened. Carefully, he opened the door and slipped in. The only thing he found was four walls, a table, and a mattress on the floor. Neither Eleazar nor any other Zealot who knew Cleopas ever heard of him again. They never got word that Cleopas bar Simon had taken his meager material possessions, traveled to Galilee, and followed the Master. He followed with resolve for the rest of his life, a life that came to an end several decades later, tied to a cross on a hill in Rome in front of the tearful eyes of his wife and three daughters, one week after finding out that Titus finally had flattened Jerusalem.

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Sarah Winegar, "Blessed be the Caretakers,"
13" x 7", woodcut, 2022

MR. LIND

Reed Richards

Ziner didn't make Mr. Lind sick, so he's under no obligation to make him feel better. Whatever small thing he chooses to do is purely out of kindness. Mr. Lind wastes in his tender flesh while Ziner struts in front of his bed to show that the one who can still walk is the one who is not a fool.

For Mr. Lind, wisdom usually ends with a question mark. He knows, for instance, that if a good man can't forgive his enemies, how can he forgive himself? For going into ministry knowing that God hated the sin he, in the end, would die of. For marrying because his profession in those years demanded it.

"Know yourself," Ziner says, "that's according to the Greeks. Evil men deceive the world. Fools deceive themselves and pay the price."

"Didn't Jesus say call no man fool?" says Mr. Lind. "Didn't he say with what judgment ye judge . . . ?"

Ziner says, "Let reason and not your base appetites guide your life."

"Not love?" Mr. Lind says. "No place for charity? Besides reason there is spirit. Your spirit doesn't guide you *ever*?"

Mr. Lind has two passions. The other one is God.



Mr. Lind asks Ziner to take the box of video tapes under the bed so that after he dies his sons won't discover these relics of his appetite. His two sons live out of state. Mr. Lind would like to see them before he dies but knows they will probably wait until he is dead before they decide to come see him.

"Don't give me trash," Ziner says. "Those tapes are trash."

“I wasn’t asking you to watch them,” says Mr. Lind. “Then take the cardinal statuette in the window so I will know where it has gone. I like to think of you having it.”

“That’s trash, too,” Ziner says. “Your taste was always so . . .” He searches for a word. “Disembodied,” Ziner says. “Unconnected,” he says. “Did you ever have a practical thought?”

“I won’t ask you to take the mobile, then,” says Mr. Lind, who is thinking practically. The mobile hangs in front of the bedroom window, above the statuette, a nice accent: the weights are all glass cardinals in flight. On summer afternoons, the sun comes through gaps in the leaves and branches of the hawthorn outside the window and shines through the mobile, making red angels with white sunburst hearts on the opposite wall.

Ziner means not to leave anything when he dies. That day is not far, but he doesn’t know. In life he was a coin dealer, living by the impractical passions of collectors, but never sentimental himself.

“Who sold you this lamp?” Ziner asks. Mr. Lind has always too easily allowed himself to be talked into things. Some of those things involved risk. Let that be the answer to your question. *Ziner* didn’t make Mr. Lind sick.



Mr. Lind lives upstairs in Mrs. Paul’s house. Mrs. Paul is ninety years old and is dating a man who is eighty-five. Mr. Lind now must be done for. It won’t be Mrs. Paul, who in spite of having a social life, would barely be able to get up and down the stairs, let alone turn Mr. Lind for sponge baths and linen changing. Insurance buys him a hospital bed with rails, but pay comes out of his savings for the round-the-clock helpers he has to hire from an agency. The helpers have to wash and diaper him and lift him and feed him and give him his pills. He smells like an overripe baby, flesh too sweet and piss too sour. His hair is thin and gray. He gets to know his helpers, asks them about their lives,

dispenses advice. For some of them, this relieves the tedium of hours spent in his cramped, fetid, hot apartment. For others, it only adds to the tedium. One lady, after two dull weeks watching his mortality progress all too slowly, helps herself to a number of blank checks from his checkbook.

Sometimes Mr. Lind catches pneumonia and has to be taken by ambulance to the hospital. The helpers can't be paid for time he is away from home.

Mr. Lind asks Ziner to do his laundry. But doesn't grumbling Ziner have better things to do? He bills Mr. Lind for machines, detergent, time, and labor. Mr. Lind, he says, has only himself to blame.



Ziner comes by two weeks later. He needs someone to complain to about his prostate.

"It's like I've been kicked in the stomach and it won't go away."

"Drink more water," says Mr. Lind. "That's the best thing you can do."

"You're handy with the medical advice, aren't you?" says Ziner. "Not that you care. I could be dying. And I'm younger than you."



In hospital. Oxygen. IVs. The usual symptoms, the usual paraphernalia. Pneumonia. No Ziner. Hospitals frighten him, but he won't say so. Mr. Lind's visitors must wear a mask. Mr. Lind could die of almost anything. It would amuse him if you were to draw a picture of an open mouth on your mask. It would comfort him if you were to read to him from the Bible. "Teach us to number our days that we may apply them unto wisdom." Blessed are the meek.

Disease and medication blunt his senses, and he grows weaker. Expressing himself is hard. More spirit now than body. Tags have grown

at the back of his tongue. The doctor offers to remove them. Mr. Lind says they don't bother him, so he won't bother them. They are the least of his misery, and losing them won't prolong his life. First the body is bruised from needles, then from being touched. How can we change your diapers, how can we keep you alive without hurting you? Everything is pain. Water is acid, air is solid stone, stars are burrs, faith is a burden that won't budge. Time itself is an awful ache. Mr. Lind is anxious to see God but must be patient. Teach us to number our days.

Mr. Lind turns seventy in the hospital.



The casket is closed on the mortician's advice. Not even his sons want to view what remains. To them, Mr. Lind was something of a specimen, but they loved him a little—as you must. They hope there is something for them in traveling all the way here from out of state. They have not had successful marriages or careers.

Ziner is here, jealous of the attention Mr. Lind is getting, which, after all, isn't so very much. The pastor didn't know him. The service will be brief. His helpers are concerned about where they will find their next job. Mr. Lind is somewhere else, so how could it matter? He doesn't have to worry about us left behind, but I suppose as a pastor himself he still does. He asks Jesus to appoint strong and sharp-sighted angels to look after us.

Outdoors, it is cloudy and the light is muted in the room from the narrow ecclesiastical windows around the tops of the walls. Ziner has someone by the buttonhole and is pointing to the cardinal mobile that has been laid across the coffin. Ziner says he has made all his own arrangements so that when he dies nothing will be left behind. He says it again for emphasis. He has sold his business, paid for his funeral, and saved a few gold coins to cover any additional costs. One thinks of a snake swallowing itself by the tail until *poof!* it is gone. Satisfying thought if you have had more than enough of Ziner, but scorn makes

us less than Mr. Lind, who had to sacrifice the trappings of dignity but never the dignity of his kindness and forgivingness.

Outside, the clouds break, and the first one to catch the light from one of the high windows is Ziner. The oil in his comb-over glitters; the fierce light on his face bleaches his age spots, obliterates all shadows. How he glows! He frowns and his forehead wrinkles, but still no shadows. He seems annoyed by the light, but, seeing so many eyes on him, he will not duck away. Mr. Lind loved Ziner, we know, but this is easier to remember when Ziner is not around. If you were to tell Ziner he is blessed, how he would scoff!

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Sarah Winegar, "We Need a Roof, We Need a Foundation,"
8" x 8", woodcut, 2022

Tanka: Upon Finding Out the Colorado Springs Murderer Is a Mormon

Hilary Brown

I could have argued
recipes with his mother
over funeral
potatoes or watched him fold
more than his share of gray chairs
at a fireside or
anyone's baby blessing
I could have nudged him
when we told the story of
laying down weapons of war
are you getting this?
I could have said, then again
he could have nudged me
when they spoke of musket fire,
a Prophet's proclamation
he could have asked me
the same thing after each hymn
marching as to war
with the cross of Je e sus
going on before
yes, well . . .
we've made our choices.

HILARY BROWN {hilaryawbrown@gmail.com} was born in Salt Lake City and is the oldest of six sisters. She graduated from Utah State University and is a proud public school teacher in a border town. Her current project is a memoir written in verse detailing her personal experiences with scrupulosity. Hilary lives in Arizona with her husband, Neil, and two-year-old daughter, Audrey.

Migration

Sharlee Mullins Glenn

when that moment comes,
let me rise like a swan, neck
outstretched in expectation, wings
wide and already beating

SHARLEE MULLINS GLENN has published poetry, essays, short stories, articles, and criticism in periodicals as varied as *Women's Studies*, the *Southern Literary Journal*, *Segullah*, *BYU Studies Quarterly*, *Ladybug*, and the *New York Times*. She is also a nationally published, award-winning author of children's books. She lives in Pleasant Grove, Utah, with her husband, James. They have five children and eight perfect grandchildren.

Newborn

Heidi Naylor

Tell us the dream where you entered the mountain
and left all your gold for the dawn

how you

dropped your robes of light become smoke
and slipped off the worn shoes of the pilgrim

you redacted the text of your spirit
 permitting its vapor to rise
 keeping only the crystalline salt of your soul

then
stepped into a small perfect skin
and greeted us
as though we had something to teach you

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Hand

Reed Richards

Cup of secrets at the mouth,
 gate of astonishment, flag of denial,
 register of deeds, cradle of arithmetic,
 ledger of greetings and good-byes,

catch of trust;

parchment

the palmist opens for a dollar in her dark tent
 and discovers in its plains and spaces,
 its map of furrowed earth, its sky

with trails of clouds and stars,

its hieroglyphs,

a puzzle reading across

and down:

so hand will extend voice into silence,
 mediate need, weave from the light

and dark of the heart an intricate basket

for kindness and pain.

At end, wing of worms,

squatters in abandoned tenements of spirit,

blind seamsters threading the sinews

of their brother fingers to an ancient, clay-bound,

hemless, secret sleep.

When even they

are soil, unturned, unmourned, what hand may still

with the haste of angels lift every-

thing that's ever breathed to houses of light,
hectic silken pavilions in trees
where history hurts and dissolves

astonishment!

in a cup of secrets at the mouth of God?

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Sarah Winegar, "Behold My Hands," 15" x 8",
woodcut, 2022

Writing from the Inside

Jacob Bender. *And All Eternity Shook*. Ships of Hagoth, 2022. 130 pp. Paper: \$15.99. ISBN: 979-8210209306.

Darin Cozzens. *The History of Honey Spring*. Zarahemla Press, 2022. 296 pp. Paper: \$14.95. ISBN: 978-0999347263.

Reviewed by Liz Busby

Lately, I've heard in a couple of different places that faithful Latter-day Saints just can't write perceptively about their community. Often, these assertions are offered as a justification for the recent proliferation of the Hollywood Mormon crime dramas that claim to portray the realities that Saints would like to cover up. Others use this idea to try to explain why the most well-known writers of Mormon literature are often those who are on the edge or have left the Church, such as Virginia Sorenson and Maureen Whipple. While an outsider's perspective is no doubt of value, I object to the idea that it provides all the insight necessary to create a literary portrait of who Latter-day Saints are. Depictions from the inside of a community can highlight certain journeys that are not available to the outside writer, as the recent movement for "own voices" has established. Two recent novels provide excellent examples of the types of insightful fiction I believe can come from the insider perspective: *And All Eternity Shook* by Jacob Bender and *The History of Honey Spring* by Darin Cozzens.

At the surface level, these two books share one thing in common: their protagonists are Mormon young men returning to a changed home. *And All Eternity Shook* features Elder David Warner, a young missionary who returns from his mission to Puerto Rico to find that his family has disguised the severity of the recurrence of his mother's cancer and that she is only days away from passing on. This character

is a lightly fictionalized version of author Jacob Bender, who had a similar experience. (Indeed, the first-person nature of the narrative and its very interior focus mean this pseudonym is rarely used. In fact, I found myself several times startled by the appearance of “Elder Warner,” thinking that I’d missed a character for half of the book.) The protagonist in *The History of Honey Spring*, Jim Ray, faces not the death of a close family member, for he’s already an orphan, but an unexpected inheritance from a long-lost relative determined to keep his property out of the hands of spiteful neighbors. Jim has just returned home from the Vietnam War, and the comparative isolation of this distant cousin’s Colorado ranch offers him the opportunity to unwind some of the post-traumatic stress disorder from his war experiences and decide his own relationship to his untethered future.

From this similar beginning, the two books diverge widely in their approach to narrative and how to evoke an emotional response in the reader. Jacob Bender’s *And All Eternity Shook* is experimental in style, leaning heavily into a poetic style, as he interweaves narratives from different periods in Elder Warner’s life. For example, a chapter near the middle of the book flips between a childhood memory of his mother singing a lullaby, an imagined prayer walk with Jesus around the Santo Domingo temple grounds begging for his mother’s life, the story of his mother’s life retold as a biblical fable, and his stumblings as a naïve missionary trying to comfort a family who has lost their child. One can see from this list the sorts of connections the chapter draws, but it’s another thing to experience them like a fast-cut movie, flashing back and forth between times and realities until it all blends together. Though the reader may sometimes be unsure for paragraphs at a time exactly where they are in David Warner’s life, this style is mostly effective because the book is not so much concerned with plot as with the disorienting emotional roller coaster he is experiencing—his whiplash transition from dedicated missionary to grieving son. Bender doesn’t hold back any of his character’s thoughts from the reader, causing us to experience the buffetings along with him.

In *The History of Honey Spring*, Daren Cozzins takes the opposite approach both emotionally and stylistically. Like its late-1960's protagonist, the narrative buries its emotions in descriptions of farm tasks and small-town digressions. As Jim Ray learns how to be a farmer and rancher from his lawyer, tenant, and now friend Nolan Rickett, we gradually learn more about the nature of the town where he has moved. The titular Honey Spring located on the property boundary is the source of a feud between Jim's dead relative and the neighboring Vanderfisk family, who wants to turn it into a roadside attraction. The plot proceeds with the ripple effects this decades-long dispute, interspersed with humorous commentary on rural life, like how strangers driving along the highway will assume everything is public property and free for the taking unless Jim keeps his gate closed. One pivotal scene takes place when some neighbors are helping Jim castrate his calves, complete with a vivid description of the process, which the narrator somehow renders charming and even humorous. They discover that the Vanderfisk's bull has wandered into Jim's land despite their strict separation, the implications of which ring through the rest of the plot. Embedded in these long farming and ranching meditations are blink-and-you'll-miss-it hints as to why Jim accepted the inheritance, flashes of his companions in Vietnam who weren't so lucky as to make it home, and Jim's ambivalence about the arbitrariness of his survival. I found the slow burn portrait compelling once I accepted it on its own terms, but readers who are used to being pulled along by a cliffhanger plot may struggle with Cozzins's quieter structure.

The way *The History of Honey Spring* engages with Mormonism is similarly under the surface. Rather than wrestling directly with Latter-day Saint doctrines or history, the novel engages with Mormonism on the level of the community, using the literary tropes of small-town life to build a portrait of the small-town ward. Everyone in Balford, Wyoming, has known each other forever, long enough to be overly familiar with each other's foibles. As a nonmember who has lived in the area for years, Jim's lawyer Nolan Rickett declares the town the "mother lode

of Latter-day Saint sanctimony,” but his attempts to detest his neighbors are “marred by this or that unbidden kindness, by compassion or generosity, by some genuine goodness associated with the faith” (129). Cozzens gives us the awkward bishop interview about any sexual sins that may have happened while Jim was in the military, but he also gives us the scene when long-suffering members of the elders quorum show up to help with cattle branding “in response to an invitation made just yesterday in priesthood” (130). We get ward softball games, underattended singles activities, and ward gossip about Jocelyn Vanderfisk, the niece of Jim’s neighbors visiting from Bear Lake. Jim is attracted to her but unsure about whether approaching her will make the feud over the spring better or worse. It’s difficult to capture the feeling of a longstanding ward without straying into either caricature or sentimentalism, but Cozzens manages to create a cast of characters that feels both archetypal and yet specific. In the end, the town’s issues begin to unravel not with a confrontation or drama, but with the promise of a date while putting away chairs after a funeral, the most Latter-day Saint “meet-cute” that I’ve ever seen in print.

On the other hand, Bender takes a more head-on approach in engaging with LDS theology and culture in *And All Eternity Shook*. Bender said in promotional material that he believes that the experience of losing a loved one while on a mission is a fairly common experience that he hadn’t found represented in our literature. I can testify that my husband’s experience of nearly losing his mother to a stroke while serving in Japan was a perspective-altering event for him. Much of the novel is spent condemning the way our culture shies away from the negative emotions brought up by difficult experiences. Warner condemns the way we have read the Book of Mormon as a “sacral coffee-table collection” rather than as a deeply tragic record of the downfall of a people (48). Like the biblical Jacob, Elder Warner wrestles with God over the unfairness of not receiving a miracle in exchange for his missionary faithfulness. In the climactic scene of the novel, he pulls no punches as he outright threatens God in a rage of grief and desperation: “I will pipe

bomb the Temples, burn the scriptures and set the chapels ablaze. I will pursue and persecute the Saints as did Saul of Tarsus, and there will be no vision on the road to Damascus to stop me. I will kick against the pricks until the pricks are destroyed and we are all finally free” (108). Though it’s possible to read these extremes of emotion as over the top, the earnest youth of Elder Warner carries through Bender’s message: that only a faith that has gone through not only extreme melancholy but extreme rage can then become strong and unshakeable. The resolution to this journey occurs only in the last sentences of the story, but the reader, having been through it all with Elder Warner—and with Bender—will experience it as something profound, like the exhaustion at the end of a well-run race.

Both books are part of well-established genres, though ones of opposite nature. Bender’s fictionalized autobiography will appeal to readers of poetry and literary fiction—those who are open to a raw and personal wrestle with God. This novel presents no sugar-sweet doctrine of “everything happens for a reason,” yet its faithful conclusion will bring comfort to many who have likewise suffered with unresolvable trials. Cozzen’s western, small-town tropes will appeal to a completely different set of readers, those who love Wendell Berry and Wallace Stegner. Perhaps even those non-Latter-day Saints who live among the Mormon-oversaturated communities of the Jello Belt may find their neighbors faithfully portrayed in this novel. Both books, though, prove the point that Latter-day Saints can write complex fiction about their own experiences and communities.

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The True Tales of Polygamy Fiction

William A. MacKinnon and Kenneth L. Alford, eds. *Fact, Fiction, and Polygamy: A Tale of Utah War Intrigue, 1857–1858: A. G. Browne’s The Ward of the Three Guardians*. Foreword by Richard E. Turley Jr. Tanner Trust Fund, 2022. 248 pp. Cloth: \$24.95. ISBN-10: 1647690692.

Reviewed by John G. Turner

A woman unhappily married to a polygamist. A girl trapped in Utah, separated from her father, likely soon to be sealed to a hoary elder. A gentile-accompanied flight to safety.

Albert G. Browne Jr.’s “The Ward of the Three Guardians,” published in 1877 in the *Atlantic Monthly*, possesses many of the stock elements of a good late-nineteenth-century story about Utah and the Mormons. Browne, though, based his “lightly fictionalized” (p. 28) tale on actual people and events he observed when he accompanied the US Army to the Utah Territory in 1857. After its 1877 publication in the *Atlantic Monthly*, however, “Ward” attracted little attention. Now, the indefatigable historians William P. MacKinnon and Kenneth L. Alford have resurrected Browne’s story and excavated its fascinating history.

Albert Browne is a familiar name to students of the Utah War. Based on his firsthand observation of events and interviews with many principals, in 1859 he published an extensive history of the Utah Expedition. MacKinnon and Alford give us the rest of his story, which included anonymous wartime dispatches to both the *New York Tribune* and Cincinnati’s *Enquirer*. He also became clerk to Delana R. Eckels, the newly appointed chief justice of Utah’s Supreme Court, who was traveling west with the army.

Henrietta Polydore, the ward in question, is a much more obscure figure, but MacKinnon and Alford have discovered a considerable

amount of material about her. In 1852, Henrietta's mother, along with her parents and several siblings, converted from Catholicism to Mormonism, alienating and enraging the girl's father, Henry. Two years later, the Latter-day Saint converts abruptly withdrew Henrietta from her boarding school and boarded a steamer for New Orleans. In Utah, Henrietta's aunt, Jane Mayer, became the fourth wife of Samuel W. Richards, but her mother (also Henrietta) left Utah, returned to England to help more families emigrate, and settled with them in Arkansas. The younger Henrietta Polydore remained ensconced in the Richards household. Meanwhile, Henry Polydore wanted her back, and, after a request from the British Foreign Office, US officials initiated legal proceedings that led to her return to England.

The Henrietta Polydore case caused a stir at the time but had been long forgotten by the time Browne wrote "Ward." Indeed, she had died several years before its publication. There are scraps of information about her in Browne's wartime dispatches and in the writings of her relatives, including Christina Rossetti, her cousin and a well-known poet. The fullest account of her life, however, came in Browne's story, in which he and two officials became the three wards trusted with the task of shepherding her out of Utah.

The heart of *Fact, Fiction, and Polygamy* is "Ward" itself, which MacKinnon and Alford generously designate a "novella" rather than a short story. No matter. "Ward" is a good read, much better than the many banal and melodramatic novels and stories written about Mormon Utah in the second half of the nineteenth century. For instance, Browne has mountain man Jim Bridger describe Samuel Richards (Sam Peckham in "Ward") as "not a picture card but about a ten spot" in the church hierarchy (p. 91). The fact that Browne was there gives his narration a decided richness and credibility.

It is the careful work of MacKinnon and Alford, though, that transforms an obscure short story into something of lasting value. Browne divided his story into six sections, which the editors introduce

and annotate, and they identify the many pseudonyms that Browne employed (Henrietta Perego rather than Polydore). They have found a host of documents on both sides of the Atlantic that enable them to sift fact from fiction in “Ward.” For instance, Browne depicts Jane Mayer Richards as disillusioned with polygamy and supportive of her niece’s flight from Utah, which MacKinnon and Alford consider “speculation” without evidence (p. 180). There is, however, a good bit of history in “Ward.” For instance, Browne quoted at length from a series of letters pertaining to the case, letters that the editors tracked down from the UK National Archives but have otherwise been unknown.

Fact, Fiction, and Polygamy serves two worthy purposes. Even with the editors’ apparatus, it’s a fun and quick read and a book one could enjoy in a single sitting. At the same time, it’s a window into the actual experiences of a twelve-year-old girl, her scattered relatives, a journalist, and a variety of US officials. As the editors note, “the war involved women and girls as well as the males who were their husbands, lovers, relatives, protectors, and occasional tormenters” (p. 28). MacKinnon and Alford also use the Polydore case to illustrate the war’s “sprawling geographical scope” (p. 29). In this instance, the war very much changed one woman’s life; without the conflict, Henry Polydore, British diplomats, and US officials would have been hard-pressed to locate Henrietta Polydore. And without the efforts of Albert Browne, William MacKinnon, and Kenneth Alford, we would be unlikely to remember her remarkable childhood.

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Historicizing Sects

Stewart Davenport. *Sex and Sects: The Story of Mormon Polygamy, Shaker Celibacy, and Oneida Complex Marriage*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2022. 362 pp. Cloth: \$150. Paper: \$35. ISBN-10: 0813947065.

Reviewed by Dana Logan

Stewart Davenport's *Sex and Sects* is not a Mormon studies book, but then again why is there a Mormon Studies but no Oneida Studies or Shaker Studies? We all know the answer (there are zero Oneida Perfectionists or Shakers living today), but rehashing this question in the context of a book that compares followers of John Humphrey Noyes, the Shakers, and the Mormons helped me think about several adjacent fields: communal studies, American religious history, and Mormon studies. Books that compare the Mormons to other perfectionist groups in the nineteenth century are part of a communal studies tradition that is based in a sociological methodology that studies, mostly, the past. The most famous book in this tradition is Lawrence Foster's 1984 *Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* that, as Davenport explains, is a sociological account of these three groups. It provides a picture of each group and then compares the social functions of their practices. Davenport explains that he, unlike Foster, will historicize them and show the power of religious stories in these communities' lives. To do this, Davenport explains the cosmology of each group and puts their geneses in the context of the Second Great Awakening in the Burned Over District where many seekers wanted "more" than the standard salvation offered to them by evangelicals. He also narrates each distinct era of all three groups, including moments of historical tension and their shift at the end of the nineteenth century out of sectarianism. For teaching undergraduates this book would serve

as a highly readable introduction to any of these groups and a useful meditation on sex and sectarianism.

There are three highly detailed stories of religious communities in this book. The narratives of each community align generally with the scholarship in those fields—by which I mean the account of polygamy will not seem controversial to Mormon scholars, the account of Ann Lee’s interest in celibacy follows standard accounts in Shaker history, the account of stirpiculture (Noyes’s human “breeding” program) will be familiar to those well versed in the history of Oneida. Davenport tends to cite primary sources more than secondary scholarship, which demonstrates his wide-ranging archival work. So, the question then is how the interweaving of these accounts around key themes such as children, institution building, or gender allow us to see these communities differently. Davenport argues that this interweaving allows us to see what it feels like to belong to a “sect,” a group in which every practice that repels outsiders brings you closer together, and sometimes creates disappointment. Or, for example, having friends in high places (Oneida) allows you to remain in the nation, while not having those friends forces you to leave and create your own (the Mormons). We also see the different, but parallel, stories of institution building followed by endurance (the Mormons) and declension (Oneida and the Shakers).

Scholars of any nineteenth-century “sect” benefit from becoming well-versed in the parallel stories of radical religious communities during this era. Davenport, despite his turn from Foster’s sociological model, remains highly focused on the human forces that apply equally to the Mormons, Shakers, and Oneida: a desire for theological experimentation, authoritarian leadership, and prickly family dynamics. He excels at showing how each group’s theology informed their practices, which might seem very odd to the uninitiated. The chapters on family dynamics and theologies of sexuality also show that these three groups are especially tethered in the nineteenth century through their shared emphases on a rethinking of pleasure and biological kinship. You could compare each group to other nineteenth-century groups, but there is

an enduring value to sticking to this sex triumvirate as established by Foster. As promised, Davenport does not treat these groups as static, and the book captures the changing dynamics of all three groups through historical vignettes with plenty of action. None of these groups ends up where they started with their charismatic leaders' initial visions.

Davenport's book has made me wonder: do groups who are part of the same historical story need to be compared when we can historicize their relationship to one another and to the world around them? The field of history of religions (defined at this point by scholars such as Tomoko Masuzawa) argues that comparison is an inherently ahistorical project. Comparison of these groups happened within nineteenth-century American history. The white evangelicals that loom in the background of this book compared various sects using their own nineteenth-century tools of exoticization. Comparing the three might continue these nineteenth-century evangelicals' project, even when we are trying to be more empathetic or objective. The Mormons, the Shakers, and Oneida also existed in the same time and space (loosely), and so we could talk about the common material forces that shaped them: capitalism, race, and secular governance. This is a move that is happening in Mormon studies to great effect; see, for example, David Walker's *Railroading Religion*. But this analysis in Mormon studies of Mormonism's relationship to material historical forces rarely includes other sectarian groups. This would be, I think, too big of a project. Davenport's analysis of these three groups, however, is an invitation for more big projects. We will always see more if we do not imagine any one religious community as exceptional.

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In Search of . . . Nah, Just Make It Yourself

Michael Hicks. *Wineskin: Freakin' Jesus in the 60s and 70s, A Memoir*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2022. 223 pp. Paper: \$19.95. ISBN: 978-1-56085-453-1.

Review by John Engler

From the minute I saw the title, I wanted to like this book. And when I got the book in my hands and saw the cover art, my 1960s nostalgia and Spidey-senses kicked into high gear, and I couldn't wait to crack it open. If you're wondering whether the book delivered, here's the thumbnail sketch. Likeable narrator? Check. Nostalgia? Check. Unexpected twists and turns? Check. The book delivered all of it, and then some.

One of the best parts about this conversion-to-the-LDS-Church story is that it's far from a typical conversion story (if there even is such a thing). I promise you that you will not see what's coming. Partway through, there's a great big twist, a big turn, and it blindsided me. It's one of the things I love about great stories. Now, part of me wants desperately to talk all about the unexpected twist—it needs to be talked about by somebody at some point—but it's just too early in the book's lifespan. I don't dare rob anyone of the experience of discovering it themselves. I may have said too much already.

There's an off chance that I encountered Michael Hicks, a professor of music, in the Harris Fine Arts Center in 1988 when I was a student in music classes at Brigham Young University. But even if I had, there's no way I could have guessed that this was his narrative. This story needed to be told. It's a humdinger.

But it's not just the major twist and turn and the resulting ripples that makes the story worth telling—it's the persona of Hicks himself. Hicks is a true renaissance man, and it's his one-man-band charisma that carries the narrative. He's got a skill set that is as unexpected as his story and as broad as the 1960s cultural revolution. Hicks is, by nature, a

producer of things. Compared with the youth of today who seem to be primarily consumers of digital content on digital devices, Hicks lives in an analog time and place where conspicuous consumption is not much of an option, although he devours the analog books and music of the day.

But the narrative leans into the producing and creating and designing a make-your-own-adventure kind of life. In the book, Hicks not only plays the piano and the guitar, he sings in casual and formal choir settings, writes songs (even entire orchestral scores), acts in theatre productions, and produces a variety of artwork in a variety of styles and mediums. All this artistic production peppers his story. Even lists of the books he reads show up, and as a reader, he's no slouch. And he writes—not only this book, but lengthy articles and treatises and letters, some of which he shares in their entirety.

Hicks was a man born *in* his time. If he had grown up in the 1990s or the 2000s, this story could not have happened. Much of the story depends on the intersection of the character of Michael Hicks and the 1960s and 1970s countercultural zeitgeist. There's no story without that intersection, in part because Hicks runs pell-mell into the counterculture, sometimes intentionally and other times unwittingly. But it also works because his experiences, although boundary-pushing, are so analog. Everything about Hicks's experience depends on functions of his physical world encountering the metaphysical or spiritual world, but always through inherently grounded and analog functions. And it all happens in this delightfully nostalgic life-size shoebox diorama delivered in book form.

It's probably fair to say that this memoir had some soft spots, too. Two in particular I'll mention. For one, the throughline of the plot is a little loose. Especially early on, there was a fair bit of arbitrary reminiscing, which is lovely enough but does not necessarily drive the narrative forward. Later it makes more sense, but in the moment, I felt my attention drifting, and I actually set down the book without regret for several weeks.

With a bit of shaping from a stronger editor's hand recommending, for example, an *in medias res* approach, the narrative could have

have picked up steam right from the outset. On the other hand, if the intent was to re-create the aimlessness of youth in the 1960s, it may have succeeded on that count. Fortunately for Hicks, the creative inventiveness of his personality helps carry the less compelling sections of the narrative until readers reach the really riveting parts where the pace, purpose, and interest of the narrative pick up through to the end.

Second, there's a lot of "telling" in this narrative. There's a reason for the old adage—show, don't tell—and the lack of scene building here plagues the story on a pretty regular basis. I mean I get it—it's hard to go back to thin, decades-old memories and recall enough specifics to paint them accurately. Every memoirist faces this. Hicks essentially falls prey to the trappings of how he might orally tell the story instead of using the tools of written storytelling to create scenes with entrancing sensory detail, memorable character descriptions, and compelling dialog. That's not to say there are none of those things in the book—there are. But those passages are generally brief and fairly rare, at least for my liking.

Instead, Hicks leans heavily toward summary, often omitting the sensory detail that help readers experience the moment themselves. The "telling" keeps readers at a distance and blunts the full power of a well-written scene. A few more drafts with an eye toward scene building would have gone a long way.

In addition, Hicks as narrator often surfaces in this narrative. Here's an example: "Through the next two years, I watched many of my friends . . ." Here we see Hicks watching his friends instead of readers seeing his friends directly. This might seem like a negligible difference, but the insertion of the narrator as a filter between the reader and the scene, unfortunately, blunts great moments. There are such great scenes to be had here, but readers are going to have to do just a little more work themselves to fully appreciate them.

Make no mistake—this is a roller coaster of a read. One of the most important and lovely driving forces in the narrative is Hicks's desire for meaningful community. He's continually looking for ways to connect to other people, gather them, nurture them, and create music and

community and meaning with them—with them and with God. And it's this exact driving force that results in some of the most beautiful tender moments of the book—his creation of Wineskin, a community coffeeshop/free-spirit church, for example—as well as some of the story's most unfortunate, heartbreaking turns. Through (nearly) it all, Hicks remains the eternal optimist, and seeing the way he manages to resurface and reclaim his place in the community of his making is a testament to his strength and fortitude. This book is his way, I suspect, of drawing yet more of us into his nurturing, freakin' Jesus-inspired community. It sure seems enough to inspire and nurture nearly anyone.

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The Memoir and the Shelf

Heather Gay. *Bad Mormon: A Memoir*. New York: Gallery Books, 2023. 304 pp. Hardback: \$28.99. ISBN: 9781982199531.

Jennette McCurdy. *I'm Glad My Mom Died*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2022. 320 pp. Hardback: \$27.99. ISBN: 9781982185824.

Reviewed by Adam McLain

The metaphor of the shelf is one of the balms provided to members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who are struggling with their faith. Instead of doubting and questioning faith because of the actions of others, the discoveries of history, or the consternation of

doctrine, place those doubts and questions on an imagined shelf. The doubts and questions still exist, but the answers to them can wait. By placing them on the shelf, you are in essence stalling their effect on your faith and prizing your faith over your doubts and questions. After all, all things will be known eventually, so the remedy goes. Why question now and potentially destroy your faith?

The shelf, though, is not always super strong. It's rather flimsy in many cases. The wall supports begin to cave in; the shelf starts to buckle. When someone disassociates or leaves the Church, the shelf breaks. The shelf can only take so much doubt; eventually, its hooks pull out of the imagined wall and all the doubts, fears, and questions spill out. This could happen with a featherweight of doubt or an elephant-sized question. It's personal to each person, but the ex-Mormon narrative centralizes on that moment of shelf collapse.

"When did your shelf collapse?" is a common question on r/exmormon (the Reddit collective for processing a Mormon faith transition). "How did your shelf break?" "What finally did it?" "Was it [insert historical fact, logical inconsistency, policy decision, or personal interaction]?" The shelf serves as a remedy for the faithful Latter-day Saint and as a community builder for the transitional Mormon. But it also highlights one of the core facets of post-Mormon narratives: there must be a reason or a catalyst for the move out of Mormonism.

I mention the metaphor of the shelf at the outset of this review since 2022 and 2023 brought us two post-Mormon narratives: Heather Gay's *Bad Mormon* and Jennette McCurdy's *I'm Glad My Mom Died*. In both memoirs, the authors discuss their Latter-day Saint faith of their youth and then, inevitably it seems, move on from that faith. Both books are written by celebrities and published by large presses, which means they are bringing publicity to the Church—whether for good or ill—but whereas Gay's memoir centers her exodus from Mormonism, McCurdy's Mormonism is peripheral to other events in her life.

The usual post-Mormon narrative techniques are at play in *Bad Mormon*. There are shelves. There are wrestles for the soul of her

personal religion. There is an Enos-like or a Joseph-like struggle to determine her personal relationship with God. There is some mistreatment by Latter-day Saints because of her divorce and choice to leave the Church, along with some comparison between her life in and out of the Church. But, in McCurdy's case, the common post-Mormon narrative tropes aren't part of the narrative. Instead, Mormonism is a veneer or an aesthetic rather than the central facet of existence.

Even though both of these memoirs are written by people inundated with Hollywood light throughout their lives, they reveal new approaches to the post-Mormon narrative. As such, my review highlights the contribution they potentially hold to Mormon culture and literature.



Heather Gay is a conundrum: she's a Mormon, but she's bad at it. She lives and works in Utah, too, surrounded by what she would term good Mormons—people who claim the cultural heritage of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and live its current code of conduct. Gay, on the other hand, claims the cultural heritage but rejects the code of conduct. As seen on *Real Housewives of Salt Lake City* (2020–present), she parties, drinks, and commits any level of what her neighbors might consider debauchery. For her, it's fun. It's her.

Bad Mormon is Gay's manifesto and reckoning. It's a memoir that depicts her childhood and youth in the Church, her departure from the Church, and her final culmination into the bad Mormon she is today. Its manifesto is a narrative of realization and reclamation. Within her marriage and the Church, she found herself stifled and stilted; without her marriage and the Church, she discovers a new vision of herself, one she controls and enacts through her own grit and authority. In essence, her book is about her coming into herself—someone who is not ruled by cultural norms but instead does what she wants to do.

Bad Mormon isn't simply a tale of sordid sin and personal proclivities; it's also a book that reckons with the treatment of women within

the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Gay shows how unfulfilled she was in the Church and how it didn't provide for her as she aged and developed as a human being. Her disassociation from the Church is also a recognition of the labor, pain, and dissonance that occurs in the lives of many women. Gay does not ideate on the specific reasons for this, favoring a general wave toward the entire faith as the reason, but in bringing up this important issue, her book provides a glimpse into how, perhaps, the Church could improve its treatment of women.

Of these two memoirs, *Bad Mormon* is the more traditional post-Mormon narrative. Early in her life, Gay begins to disassociate her fun self and her Church self, experimenting with life during the week but going to Young Women activities in the evening and church on Sunday. Her departure comes as her marriage dissolves; she begins to wonder if staying at home and mothering is the only thing she is good for. She wants to do more: be an entrepreneur, have a social life, engage in the world around her.

However, even as many might use Gay's narrative to attest that most people leave Mormonism because they just "can't handle" the various rules, her reckoning with the treatment of women within the walls of the Church cannot be dismissed. She shows that her exit was a desire to live in a different way, *but it was also because she found no space for herself in the Church except as a mother*. And motherhood was not as fulfilling as she had been taught. A tale of warning, then, echoes from *Bad Mormon*: underneath the partying, underneath the outward strength a businesswoman needs to exude, underneath the reality television character, Gay's life story resonates with the lack of opportunity and fulfillment some women feel in the Church.



Jennette McCurdy has what other people might consider a problem: she's glad her mom's dead. And she has good reason to be glad

about it. Her mom forced her into a Hollywood life (McCurdy starred in the mid-2000s *iCarly*, a hit show on Nickelodeon), which has affected her entire life. She gets called Sam (her *iCarly* character) on the streets, where people mimic her character's obsession with food (Sam is remembered for always carrying around a chicken leg that she would eat on screen). Unknown to many of these fans who call McCurdy out, McCurdy would act out the chicken leg scene and then that night vomit up a meal or purge her body after a binge. McCurdy's memoir is about her life growing up with a controlling mom (throughout her childhood, her mom would shower her and wipe her butt after she pooped), her mistreatment at the hands of Hollywood executives (she was forced into drinking when she was underage), and her fight with mental illness and eating disorders (she fought with bulimia for much of her life).

McCurdy was also raised Mormon, which is where this review will focus.

What's most interesting to me is that McCurdy doesn't blame Mormonism or even factor it into her history as a cause of much of her childhood trauma. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is more aesthetic than emblematic, a church among many rather than the traumatizing centerpiece. Many may read this as not being a part of Mormon literature then, but I would say it becomes even more a part of Mormon literature as we learn from someone who has a history with the Church that did not affect the rest of their life. This is not a trauma-related, leaving-the-Church narrative; McCurdy's Mormonism is simply a part of her past.

This isn't to say that Mormonism didn't affect her life. As a child, McCurdy found refuge within the walls of the Church. It's her reprieve from the troubles that beset her home life. She even goes so far as conflating her obsessive-compulsive disorder with the Holy Ghost, believing that God is prompting her to perform various rituals in order to receive various blessings. When she begins to date, even, the same culture mores around the law of chastity bind her actions; she doesn't

want to have sex with her intimate partners if they are just dating. Even as Mormonism has an effect on her life, though, it isn't traumatic or negative when she stops attending; in fact, McCurdy doesn't really mention it. Mormonism fades into her background, a part of her childhood, never the reason for the problems she works through.

I find importance in McCurdy's text when it comes to Mormon culture and literature because it offers an alternative to the binary narrative of proactively in or antagonistically out, which so much determination of Mormonism swirls around. So many autobiographies of Mormonism are about the trials of staying in or the harrowing experience of leaving, but for McCurdy, there isn't a great narrative arc about her relationship to Mormonism. It was a part of her childhood and then, when things were going well, her family slowly slid away from it, making it a part of the past without an immediate effect on her present or future.

McCurdy defies the usual post-Mormon narrative, whether told by active Latter-day Saints or ex-Mormons, and provides an alternative story to those who leave the Church: they just leave, and leaving doesn't have a large effect on the rest of their life.¹ This is what makes McCurdy's memoir an important addition to Mormon literature, especially literature concerning the post-Mormon experience: the Church is not, nor should it always be, at the center of all post-Mormon narratives.



Bad Mormon and *I'm Glad My Mom Died* are not paramount Mormon culture. Indeed, even though *Bad Mormon* is written about Gay's transformation into a bad Mormon, neither book is written *to* or *for* Latter-day Saints. In fact, *Bad Mormon* goes so far as to even depict the Latter-day Saint temple ordinances in detail, something many

1. Jana Riess comes to a similar conclusion in her own review of McCurdy's work: "What 'I'm Glad My Mom Died' Teaches Us About Ex-Mormons," *Flunking Sainthood*, Religious News Service, May 30, 2023.

Latter-day Saint readers might find repulsive. The authors of these books aim to share their lives with a wider audience. As such, their narrative choices stray toward general audience—but in those choices we can learn about the relationship between Mormonism and broader culture. After all, Mormonism was important enough to a child actress and a reality television star that both wrote extensively in their books about it.

With these two memoirs, published by large publishing houses and receiving national publicity, we can see that the arguments around shelves are insular to Mormonism. Someone's faith journey into or out of Mormonism is not always a dramatic interplay of dark nights of the soul or broken shelves. And it isn't always about being in or being out, being fully present or being fully inactive. For McCurdy, the Church is aesthetic, a childhood memory of a place that once provided refuge for a struggling child; for Gay, the Church is just another patriarchal institution, one in which she found herself growing out of and needing to conquer and escape to realize her potential. These memoirs—especially McCurdy's—enlarge the narratives of post-Mormon literature in a way that decenters the Church and recenters individual, complex experiences.

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Virginia Is Not Lost!

Stephen Carter. *Virginia Sorensen: Pioneering Mormon Author*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2023. 136 pp. Paperback. ISBN: 9781560854586.

Reviewed by Laurie Illions Rodriguez

As a baby, author Virginia Sorensen's first sentence was "tell me a story." According to her mother, this was soon followed by her second sentence, "I'll tell *you* a story" (2).

In his recently released biography, Steven Carter opens up Virginia Sorensen's story, letting us hear her voice. And her voice is one that is worth hearing. Sorensen (1912–1991) was an author of novels and children's books in the 1940s–1970s. Coming from Utah Mormon heritage, she often wrote historical novels about Mormon characters, including *A Little Lower than the Angels*, set in 1840s Nauvoo. As Carter writes, "Open one of Sorensen's LDS novels. . . . In her gentle, lyrical, insightful prose, your own experience—as hum-drum or as dramatic as it may be—will take on a poetry, a nostalgia, a widening that will follow you for the rest of your life" (vii). I felt this myself when I first discovered Sorensen's work and was drawn to immerse myself in her writing for my master's thesis. Carter quotes Linda Sillitoe who mused, "Someone like Virginia arouses hunger . . . to know intensity, to live in beauty" (119).

With this biography, we now have the opportunity to come to know the person behind the creativity. Carter vividly tells Sorensen's life story, continually weaving in colorful threads of quotes, collected and curated from her literary works, speeches, and personal letters, enabling the reader to hear her expressive and lyrical voice, identify with her artistic and familial challenges, laugh at her humor, mourn her sorrows, thrill with her triumphs, and savor her simple delights. Carter creates not only a cohesive picture of her life experience but also gives us a taste of

her vibrant personality—the sound of her voice echoing from the pages long after the book is closed. For instance, as Carter recounts Sorensen's childhood, we can hear her childlike sense of awe in her description of her favorite place to dream and write, a closet underneath the stairs, “a little house of my own, . . . with a tall window . . . which made one miraculous streak of light to read by, . . . [and] a secret view of the yard outside. . . . There was also a private rainbow, for the top pane was a little fan of vari-colored glass” (2–3).

Carter also provides insightful literary perspectives on each of her nine novels, giving plot summaries as well as intriguing theories on how the works might relate to one another. For instance, he shows how *Kingdom Come*, though written later, functions like a “first movement” of a symphony, a foundation that gives the rest of her previous novels their full weight and depth (99). He illustrates how each could be seen as an experiment in characters navigating the integration of conflicting cultures. And he shows how the forms of certain stories match their subject matter, what as a musician I would call text-painting. For example, he points out that in *The Neighbors*, which starts with metaphorical themes of being stuck in Eden, the story structure itself is stagnant until the characters break out of their situation (84).

Sorensen also wrote seven children's books, including *Miracles on Maple Hill*, which was honored with the 1957 Newbery Award. In his analysis of her children's books, Carter highlights her ability to see and portray things from a child's perspective, which he refers to as “lantern consciousness” (110). He illustrates with colorful examples how she portrays children's emotions in their full depth, whether they be wonder, “rapture,” or “tragedy” (114). He also writes about how this perspective allows readers to “follow her child protagonists as they non-judgmentally bring everything they encounter into their newly forming world view, . . . soaking” it all in (111).

Carter shows how Sorensen's works are not only timelessly beautiful but also, surprisingly, newly relevant. He theorizes that just as

technological innovations during Sorensen's day opened a new era of cross-cultural encounters that transformed Mormons' relationship to their church and to the world, today the internet is acting in a similarly transformative way (viii).

He writes:

The young Latter-day Saints of [Sorensen's] time . . . were pioneers, just as their great-grandparents had been, but this new generation was called to synthesize the capitals of culture with the sequestered valleys of Zion. What would that synthesis look like? No one knew—including these budding writers. It was new territory. . . . Virginia Sorensen's Mormon novels were about exactly that. Rather than being prescriptive (as her home literature forebears were), her novels are descriptive, showing readers, with great detail and insight, characters navigating the borderlands between Mormonism and the rest of the world. (72)

He proposes a new term to refer to Sorensen's generation of writers who have, up until now, been referred to in Mormon literary circles as the "lost generation," reminiscent of post-World War I novelists who were disillusioned and critical of their homeland. Carter makes an excellent case for why the label "lost generation" is not appropriate for Sorensen, and then he proposes a much more accurate label for this set of authors—"new pioneers" (74). I approve! I had never felt that the term "lost generation" was an apt label for Sorensen and, in the 1990s, I argued against it in my master's thesis. Carter's new label is much more accurate, and I hope that it catches on.

Sorensen *was* a Mormon literary pioneer. As an author among the first generation of writers to explore the inevitable cultural intersections created by the railroad era, she traversed on uncharted ground that opened up new possibilities for the following generations. As Carol Lynn Pearson says in her poem, pioneers follow "where truth flies":

Pioneers

. . . Where truth flies you follow
If you are a pioneer.

I have searched the skies
And now and then
Another feather has fallen.
I have packed the handcart again
Packed it with the precious things
And thrown away the rest.
I will sing by the fires at night
Out there on uncharted ground . . .
(carollynnperson.com/pioneers)

Unlike the prescriptive “home literature” that came before her, where, as Carter points out, characters were “punished and rewarded according to their beliefs and actions . . . pawns of the story . . . pushed toward redemption or destruction by the theme’s invisible current” (73), Sorensen did not write to preach with a fixed spiritual journey for the reader in mind. Nor did she write to condemn. Her characters are not heroes or villains but are, as Carter poetically describes, “feeling their way along; interacting with the world as they find it; picking up the disparate oddities, tragedies, and treasures they find along the way and trying to make something new out of them” (73). Or as Carter aptly puts it: “None of Sorensen’s characters travels the sure path laid down by the traditional Mormon story structure. Her stories do not end with her characters either triumphant or destroyed. No particular values are being promoted, and none roundly condemned. Rather, readers are presented human beings trying to make their way through a complex and shifting world with no iron rod in sight” (70). As Sorensen herself said, “A novel is seldom an explanation, but rather an exploration” (104).

Sorensen was able to escape taking sides because she had both an insider and outsider view (ix). Richard Rohr calls this the “edge of things,” a “liminal space,” and “a holy place.” He states:

To take your position on the spiritual edge of things is to learn how to move safely in and out, back and forth, across and return. It is a prophetic position, not a rebellious or antisocial one. When you live

on the edge . . . [y]ou are free from its central seductions, but also free to hear its core message in very new and creative ways. . . . Not an outsider throwing rocks, not a comfortable insider who defends the status quo, but one who lives precariously with two perspectives held tightly together—the faithful insider and the critical outsider at the same time. Not ensconced safely inside, but not so far outside as to lose compassion or understanding. . . . [H]old[ing] these perspectives in a loving and necessary creative tension. It is a unique kind of seeing and living. (Fr. Richard Rohr, “Life on the Edge: Understanding the Prophetic Position,” *HuffPost*, May 25, 2011, www.huffpost.com/entry/on-the-edge-of-the-inside_b_829253)

Perhaps this is why Sorensen’s “one foot inside and one foot outside” position, as Carter describes it, gives her the freedom to be what he calls an “ethnographic novelist of Mormonism” and allows her to have the creative, insightful, and compassionate perspective that he highlights (ix).

Sorensen and her characters were never lost. Yes, unlike the writers of “home literature” that came before, neither she nor her characters were on a prescribed path, and Sorensen did not write to preach nor to malign Mormonism. Carter quotes Sorensen as saying she was not “interested in Mormonism particularly. Not *particularly*” (101) but posits that she created stories about her native community of Mormons in order to explore her real subject, “love” (101). He writes, “The hallmark of Sorensen’s writing . . . is her ability to empathize with every one of her characters. Though Sorensen’s characters may wander the wilderness of belief, they are not lost, because they are deeply understood and loved, both by the author and, soon enough, by the reader” (74).

However, in emphasizing the significance of the empathy and compassion in Sorensen’s writing, Carter draws an unnecessary and misleading parallel. He states, “The difference between home literature and Virginia Sorensen’s novels is like the difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament is about how a peculiar people establishes itself in the world [which] requires

judgment. . . . The New Testament is about God's mercy." He suggests that in Sorensen's time, Mormonism had moved on from the judgmental identity-establishing stage to the merciful connecting phase. He concludes, "Just as the central theme of the Four Gospels and Paul's writings is that God's great miracle is coming into atonement with all of creation, so is it in Sorensen's Mormon novels" (73–74).

While examining the tension between establishing identity and expansiveness is relevant, it is a false dichotomy to credit the New Testament with one side of the tension and the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) with the other. The age-old trope of equating rigid expectations, judgment, insularity, and punishment with the Hebrew Bible while equating spirit of the law, mercy, connection, and love with the New Testament is an inaccurate view of the Hebrew Bible. Though it is common to portray Jesus' teachings about love as revolutionary by painting his backdrop to be the darkened opposite of whatever is being highlighted, actually, all of the mercy, emphasis on spirit of the law, flexibility, and love of neighbor and stranger have their roots in the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic teachings themselves. By leaning on this erroneous trope, Carter fails, in this instance, to escape the parochialism that he praises Sorensen for transcending. Through his Mormon- and Christian-influenced lens, he fails to see a tradition that is not his own for what it truly is.

He goes on to make the bold claim that in "trying to bring Mormonism into conversation with the rest of America," Sorensen "took a path of atonement and ushered in the most Christlike novels the Mormon tradition has produced" (74). Despite his Old Testament/New Testament false dichotomy, I *do* wholeheartedly agree with the essence of his central claim, that Sorensen "ushered in" the most universally sympathetic and thoughtfully connective novels the "Mormon tradition has produced" (74).

In the epilogue, Carter quotes Cynthia Sillitoe who cried after reading *The Evening and the Morning* "because the writing was so beautiful;

because Virginia was so present; because Virginia was gone.” Carter concludes that this is how he feels as well. After reading her novels, he says, “I desperately miss someone I have never even met” (119).

I also feel this after reading Sorensen’s novels, as well as after reading Carter’s biography. It is filled with detail and insights that helped me to know Sorensen more deeply and made me hunger to know her even more. This biography is a delightful and thoughtful introduction to Virginia Sorensen for those who have yet to discover her, and it is a rich resource for those of us who already know and love Sorensen’s work.

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COWBOY CHARITY

Justin Goodson

Cowboy Charity was delivered as a talk on March 12, 2023, in the Frontenac Ward of the St. Louis Missouri Stake.

A cowboy from Wyoming taught me everything I know about charity. He taught me that charity is about respecting our shared human experience.

Paul and I were different. Paul was short and round. I was tall and slender. Paul wore boots with steel toes and heels. I wore tennis shoes with insoles. Paul loved guns. He stored them in the glove box and wore them on his hip. Once, when the house caught on fire, his wife called him from the blaze. Paul yelled through the phone, “Forget about the photo albums. Grab the guns!” In contrast, I’m convinced the National Rifle Association is a secret combination. Paul listened to Fox News. I took in a daily dose of National Public Radio. Paul drove a truck with four rear wheels that could tow a trailer full of horses. I drove a minivan with cushy captain’s seats and a bike rack. Despite once serving as an officer of the law, Paul viewed the speed limit as a minimum. I know this because when I caravanned with Paul’s truck through the Bighorn Mountains, pushing my minivan to ninety-five miles per hour was barely enough to keep up. Usually, you’ll find me plodding along in the slow lane. In short, Paul was a cowboy through and through. I was not.

Despite our differences, most of the time Paul and I got along just fine. But on one night, the gap between us led to friction.

The Beaumont Boy Scout Reservation is just west of St. Louis. It sits off Interstate 44, at the top of the hill that overlooks the small town of

Eureka and the popular Six Flags amusement park. Most scouts pitch their tents in the reservation's grassy fields. They're spacious enough to accommodate hundreds of scouts, fully equipped with trucks, trailers, and giant propane stoves. However, if you're willing to pack in your gear, and your group is small, Beaumont offers a more authentic camping experience.

Just north of the reservation's main road, in a grove of pine trees, is an outdoor chapel. Park your car there and hike uphill about half a mile and then across flat terrain for another half mile. Here, high above the main campsites in the fields below, you'll find an area secluded by thick trees. There's a makeshift firepit and a few patches of open ground suitable for two-man tents. On a cool autumn evening, this is where Paul and I camped, along with a group of scouts.

After the sun went down and darkness settled in, we all gathered round the fire to keep warm. It was in this setting that Paul made some comments I disagreed with. The young men, including my own sons, overheard. I felt the need to speak up. I voiced my opposition loud enough for all to hear. The whole ordeal didn't last more than two minutes. As with many squabbles in life, the details are not important. The interaction left me feeling uncomfortable. But I was in the middle of major personal issues and had a hundred other problems pressing down on me, so this incident with Paul was the least of my worries. I brushed it aside and moved on.

One month later, I found myself in the same place with the same group. It was colder and the leaves had fallen from the trees. As I sat in front of the campfire, I felt a tap on my shoulder. "Hey Justin, can we talk for a minute?" Paul asked. We walked down the trail away from the group. Paul stood close to me. In the darkness, I could see the reflection of the campfire flickering in his glasses. "It's just been eating at me these last few weeks," Paul said. "I feel bad about the hard feelings between us. I don't want either of us to feel ill toward the other."

I hadn't realized that our disagreement had had such an effect on Paul. He started to choke up. His voice cracked. "I love you, brother. I'm sorry." The cowboy and the city slicker embraced. Then we walked back to the campfire.

Paul's brief act of charity didn't last any longer than our disagreement a month earlier, but it has stayed with me for years. Those few moments next to a campfire on top of a hill just west of St. Louis are burned into my memory. I have not had an experience like it before or since. For context, I was at the lowest point of my life. I was alone, I was profoundly sad, and each day was a struggle. In the middle of my personal chaos, a cowboy from Wyoming showed me human decency. Paul showed me what it meant to apologize and to love another person, even if we still disagreed on certain topics. Paul had no idea what I was facing. He couldn't have known that healing a small wound would somehow be a balm for much larger injuries. From that moment to this day, I've held up Paul's actions as a model of how kindness can touch a soul.

Not long afterward, Paul and his family moved away from St. Louis. Across the next few years, I often thought that I should write to Paul and thank him, but I procrastinated. By January of 2021 it was too late. Tragically, Paul ended his own life. Unbeknownst to me, Paul had long struggled with mental illness. He also felt alone, profoundly sad, and each day was a struggle. Like a late-stage cancer patient whose efforts to live are ultimately futile, Paul's condition was terminal. I am under no illusion that writing to Paul would have changed his trajectory, but I regret that I missed an opportunity to reciprocate a cowboy's charity.

Paul's apology demonstrated charity from one person to another. Learning about the internal struggles that ultimately ended Paul's life helped me understand charity more generally. Paul's belt buckle may have been three sizes bigger than mine, and the brim of his cowboy

hat may have dwarfed my baseball cap, but Paul and I were more similar than different. We all are. Across our varying circumstances, we experience similar feelings. I'm not bipolar or schizophrenic or chronically depressed, but my own struggles have allowed me to taste some flavor of these emotions. I may not be able to fully appreciate the depth of chronic mental illness, but my relatively brief encounters with this spectrum of emotions afford enough empathy to open the door to charity. My limited experiences motivate me to show kindness and decency, even if I can't put all the pieces of another person together or see the full picture of their life.

I imagine this is what it means to have Christlike charity. Jesus didn't live my life or Paul's or yours, yet he offers understanding and compassion. Our empathy for others may not run as deep as divine empathy. We may fall far short of fully comprehending another person. Yet, we can "mourn with those who mourn" (Mosiah 18:9). Jesus may have a leg up on us when it comes to succoring all people, but we can "comfort those" in our local circles "that stand in need of comfort" (Mosiah 18:9).

If empathy and mourning and comforting are outside of your wheelhouse, then you can approach charity like Paul approached speed limits. Start with a minimum standard of basic kindness and decency. You'll find that the difference between Jesus' own charity and the Christlike charity the rest of us strive for is one of degrees. Despite our differences in personality, circumstance, race, orientation, wealth, intelligence, body weight, genetic predisposition, and on and on, our shared human experience connects us. To be alive and to breathe are the only prerequisites for charity. That's what I learned from a Wyoming cowboy who sat with me around a campfire.

Paul, I miss you. You showed me charity. Did you know that because of you I have my own cowboy boots? Did you know that because of you I have my own cowboy hat? Did you know that because of you I still

drive in the slow lane? Thank you, Paul, for taking a genuine interest in my well-being. On a night that was as cold and as dark as my life at the time, your kind words made all the difference. Brother, I love you, too.

JUSTIN GOODSON {justin.c.goodson@gmail.com} is a professor of operations management at Saint Louis University. He holds degrees in management science and engineering from the University of Iowa and the University of Missouri. He researches sequential decision problems with uncertain information, focusing largely on problems arising in transportation and logistics. He teaches and consults in the areas of operations and supply chain analytics.

ARTISTS

LAURA EREKSON was born in Oakland, California, and presently lives in Salt Lake City. Her printmaking and sculpture background influences her current body of work. Using found objects and plants, Laura's paintings are rich in texture, leaving behind details and fragments of the objects themselves. She received a BFA from Brigham Young University and a MAT from George Mason University. Laura's work has been exhibited across the nation including the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C.

SARAH WINEGAR lives in Salt Lake City with her husband and three kids. She carves and paints in the margins of the day, her work exploring the pushes and pulls of caretaking, partnership, and seeking out the divine.

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MORMON STUDIES REVIEW

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The *Mormon Studies Review* (*Review*) tracks the vibrant, varied, and international academic engagement with Mormon institutions, lives, ideas, texts, and stories.

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